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“White Skin”: Lyotard’s Sketch of a Postcolonial Libidinal Economy

Abstract

In 1975 Jean-François Lyotard published a short text entitled *Pacific Wall*. A mash-up of philosophy, fiction, biography, and art criticism, it is a dissimulatory and paradoxical text, highly gnomic if read in isolation. Yet if, as I propose here, we read it alongside his main book from this period, *Libidinal Economy*, a clearer picture emerges. *Pacific Wall* may then be read as sketching a postcolonial libidinal economy in the context of capitalism in its global expansion. The central concept of the book is “white (or blank) skin,” a concept which avoids any simple identification and which instead expresses a series of permutations of desire in relation to race and sex: “white skin” is equally the skin of white heterosexual women and of black homosexual men; equally the otherness at the borders of capital’s expansion and the supposed identity at the heart of the empire. Lyotard’s libidinal economic approach to the postcolonial offers an alternative perspective to those more well-known in continental philosophy, such as the existential phenomenology of Sartre and Fanon, or the discursive and deconstructionist approaches prevalent in much more recent postcolonial theory. Such a perspective suggests that political issues endemic to the postcolonial situation may be understood in terms of the circulation of largely unconscious feelings such as lust, jealousy, fear, and the desire for revenge, and that these circulate and mutate along with the flows and transformations of capital.

Keywords: Jean-François Lyotard, libidinal economy, postcolonial theory, race theory.

Word count: 7200 (approx.)

Introduction: Lyotard and North Africa

Jean-François Lyotard always wanted his thoughts to drift, to not be tied to an exclusive origin and guarantor of meaning – such as, for example, what we call the “subject” in the philosophical tradition, or the idea of a unified “self” with a coherent story, as is typically constructed in biographies. To biographize Lyotard is thus to risk betraying his thought, as well as to misunderstand it. And yet I believe it is sometimes worth taking this risk because it allows us to connect points otherwise unconnected in Lyotard’s texts themselves; to increase our yield of understanding from at least a certain limited perspective, and to allow our own thoughts to drift with Lyotard’s in a richer field, once we uncouple them again from the

narrative structure we impose on his thought and life. In particular, the biographical points I want to note here allow us to see how Lyotard's thought might have applications for postcolonial theory, in ways not immediately evident from only a casual acquaintance with his work.

Let us begin, then, with the observation that Lyotard's political thought was formed in the crucible of decolonisation that was the Algerian struggle for independence. Upon completing his *agrégation*, he took up a teaching position at the Lycée d'Aumale in Constantine, Algeria, in 1950, where he remained for two years. He later wrote of this experience as an awakening, struck as he was by the depth of the injustice done to the native population by colonising France. "Algeria [...]," he wrote, 'had for me the importance of something that initiates one directly into the political.'¹ It was in this context that he began to read Marx seriously, and became actively involved in union activities. Lyotard returned to France in 1952 because he felt that if he had stayed he would have become involved with the Algerian liberation movement, exposing his young family to risk.² His engagement with Algeria continued, however, on both theoretical and practical fronts. He became involved with an Algerian independence support network led by the Egyptian communist Henri Curiel, which distributed funds and false papers to Algerian nationalists, and hid Algerians wanted by the police.³ Relatively little is known of Lyotard's specific involvements in these activities; they were of course illegal and needed to be kept secret, as the arrest and public trial of members of the network in 1960 attests. Yet an anecdote reported by Lyotard's eldest daughter affords us a flash of insight: she tells of finding an Algerian man hiding in their closet whilst playing hide-and-seek with her sister.⁴

In 1954 Lyotard joined the international Marxist group *Socialisme ou barbarie*, and became responsible for the "Algerian section" of this group. Between 1956 and 1963, he contributed a series of articles (often under a pseudonym) to the group's eponymously titled journal, devoted to analysing the economic and political situation in the Maghreb, and Algeria in particular.⁵ These articles examined the Algerian situation from a Marxist perspective as the war for independence unfolded during these years, with a view to understanding what the

¹ Jean-François Lyotard, *Peregrinations*, 75, n. 12.

² Bamford, *Jean-François Lyotard*, 43-4.

³ Bamford, *Jean-François Lyotard*, 55.

⁴ Bamford, *Jean-François Lyotard*, 45.

⁵ These essays were collected in *La Guerre des Algériens*. The majority are translated in *Political Writings*.

developing contradictions boded for socialist revolution in both the local and international contexts.

As is well known, Lyotard lost his faith in doctrinal Marxism by the mid-1960s, and later became famous for his definition of the postmodern condition as “incredulity toward metanarratives,” one of which is Marxism itself. Yet (and this is perhaps less well-known) he continued to insist that there was an aspect of Marxism which had not ended, the concern for injustice and the attempt to bring it to critical attention. Moreover, despite what looked to Marxist critics like a complete capitulation to capitalism, Lyotard never lost sight of the critical analysis of this system, which he continued to view, like some prominent members of the Frankfurt School, as a “soft totalitarianism” perpetuated in liberal democracies.

What emerges through Lyotard’s writings on Algeria is the loss of belief that a single theoretical perspective can express and do justice to all the complex political issues at stake in a situation like that of Algeria. The presumption of the *Socialisme ou barbarie* group was that the exclusive perspective from which all struggles should be viewed is that of the struggle for international socialism. It would be too simplistic to suggest that Lyotard lost his faith in Marxism because a socialist revolution failed to manifest in Algeria, since from his first essay in 1956 (“The Situation in North Africa”) he was grappling with the difficulty of feeling the need to support the Algerian independence movement whilst also acknowledging that it would likely lead not to a socialist state, but to new relations of exploitation.

Nevertheless, the essays proceed to work through this difficulty from a broadly Marxist perspective, while its limitations increasingly come into focus. Significantly, one of the concerns expressed in his writings on colonial Algeria is the way that the native population was oppressed by the imposition of a culture that was not their own, and the construction of their identity as racially and culturally inferior. Lyotard uses the term *crouille* – which Bill Readings and Kevin Paul Geiman translate as “wog” – to indicate the racial and cultural slander members of the native population were subject to. In 1963, after the proclamation of Algerian independence, Lyotard indicates that this – and *not* the struggle for socialism – was a key impetus of the Algerians’ struggle for independence: “There were many signs that the Algerians sought to destroy not so much the French as the ‘wogs’ into which they themselves

had been transformed by the French.”⁶ In his last essay on Algeria, Lyotard thus recognises that the issues at stake were not so much ones of class but of race and culture:

[T]he problem posed in colonial Algeria was not that of socialism defined as a movement toward the classless society ... the choice was not between being proletarian or free but between being “wog” or Algerian.⁷

Lyotard observed the way that the unity which held together the liberation movement fragmented again as soon as liberation was achieved, and together with the loss of faith in the exclusive perspective of Marxism, this led him to a thoroughgoing encounter with political nihilism, which in one way or another he was to work through for the rest of his life.⁸ Always, the question for him was how not to collapse in despair in face of the conviction that the old political categories and practices had lost their footing, but instead to invent new ways of thinking and acting “the political.” We must restrict ourselves here to the attempted solutions he tries out in the mid-1970s, in which reflections on capitalism, sexuality, and race combine to produce what I suggest is a sketch of a postcolonial libidinal economy. Lyotard’s key text here is the relatively little-known *Pacific Wall*, in which such issues are directly addressed.⁹ Read in isolation the text is often highly gnomic, since it draws on concepts more fully developed in his major work of this period, *Libidinal Economy*. We will therefore examine some of the key ideas of this work, and in particular the libidinal economy of the capitalist system, before turning to *Pacific Wall*.

The Libidinal Economy of Capital

In *Libidinal Economy* (1974) and associated essays from the same period, Lyotard develops the view that “every political economy is a libidinal economy”¹⁰: that is, political systems can and must be analysed not from the perspective of the ideas and reasonings of supposedly

⁶ Lyotard, *Political Writings*, 302.

⁷ Lyotard, *Political Writings*, 303.

⁸ See James Williams’ *Lyotard and the Political*, especially chapter one, for a thorough analysis of how Lyotard’s essays on Algeria may be read as leading to a crisis of political nihilism.

⁹ This text has received little attention in the English secondary literature on Lyotard, but two exceptions are Georges Van Den Abbeele’s review of the book, “Up against the Wall: The Stage of Judgment,” and Joseph J. Tanke’s article “Art before the Sublime: The Libidinal Economy up against the Pacific Wall.”

¹⁰ See *Libidinal Economy*, 108-21.

autonomous agents, nor from ideological structures, but rather from the point of view of the feelings and desires that circulate and are transformed in them. In effect, Lyotard develops a reading of Marx in terms of Freud, but with various creative philosophical twists influenced by (among other things) the Nietzscheanism of the period.

Lyotard posits that there are two meanings of desire discernible in Freud: desire as force or libido, and desire as lack. He posits an ontological monism of desire as libido (which he associates with Nietzsche's will to power) which is purely positive, polymorphously perverse (desire is infinitely displaceable and doesn't invest in fixed objects or run on fixed circuits), and associated with the primary psychical processes. This desire is essentially what Freud describes as characterising the body of the infant, but Lyotard extends it to describe anything and everything from a libidinal perspective, and especially the "body politic." This "body" is however not an organised body; from the point of view of desire it does not possess an organic unity, with different organs invested with specific functions, and the whole coordinated around aims or goals (in Freudian terms this only arises later, through the child's psychosexual development and organisation of desire around the genital aim of reproduction). Lyotard describes this state of desire as a labyrinthine "libidinal band," on which polymorphous desires circulate at infinite speed.

Desire as lack arises from a modification of libido, which Lyotard describes topologically as the transformation of the libidinal band into the "theatrical volume." In Freudian terms this accords with the infant's development as it learns to think rationally, concomitantly with an organisation of desire and the construction of an "organic body." This is the substitution of the secondary psychical processes for the primary, of the reality principle for the pleasure principle, and the formation of the unconscious through repression. Desire becomes lack as it regulates itself and invests objects which may be represented as lacking, because the "theatrical volume" is able to distinguish between the inside and outside of the organism, and to represent, on the inside, phantasmatic projections of what is outside (wishes).

This basic transformation of desire, between the libidinal band and the theatrical volume, provides the basis for far more complex descriptions of objects, social institutions, political relations, and events, structures, and systems of all kinds in libidinal terms. In *Libidinal Economy*, Lyotard describes, throughout several chapters, what he suggests remains only a preliminary outline of the libidinal economy of capitalism. This begins with a libidinal

reading of Marx, highly heretical from “traditionalist” Marxist perspectives. Lyotard asks what Marx *desires*, and what affects motivate his work. Significantly for what we will see with *Pacific Wall*, this reading makes much of Marx’s characterisation of all work under capitalism as prostitution.¹¹ According to Lyotard’s analysis, Marx sees capitalism as an “unnatural” – that is, in libidinal terms, *perverse* – political economy which distorts the natural course of desire. That is, Marx proposes that there is an original “organic unity” of the social body in which desires circulate in a healthy, useful, and nonexploitative manner (a classless society of nonexploited labour). Capitalism perverts this organic body by introducing exchange-value, indexed on the universal equivalent that is money, which allows investments and exchanges across all manner of things, breaking down supposedly natural categories of value and sickening the social body. What Marx fears and recoils from in capitalism, Lyotard suggests, is precisely *prostitution*, understood as the perversion of desire in non-useful expenditures; under capitalism, the healthy organic body become a monstrous patchwork of partial drives.

For Lyotard, what is at stake in any economic system from a libidinal perspective is intensity or the enjoyment of desire (*jouissance*). Marx, he suggests, illegitimately denies that there is such intensity in the capitalist system, and holds on to what is really just a phantasy that only the reconciled organic (social) body can produce gratification. To the contrary, Lyotard argues quite extensively (and sometimes shockingly, from a Marxist perspective) that capitalism is a system in which a great deal of libidinal intensity is present, precisely because it *is* generalised perversion and prostitution. Indeed, there is something of a celebration of prostitution in the pages of *Libidinal Economy*. Lyotard analyses various political economies as historical stages on the way to modern capitalism, and notes, as an important step, the introduction of prostitution into the economy in the Lydian state. He writes:

the Lydians [...] prostituted their daughters, and so they have vulvas, clitorises, breasts and their nipples, full buttocks, hair, soprano and contralto cries of pleasure, the smells of vaginal secretions, seed squeezed from skins, hairs from the insides of arms and thighs, different colours of hair, of irises, different muscular textures, different bone structures, different

¹¹ “Prostitution,” Marx writes in a footnote to the *1844 Manuscripts*, “is only the specific expression of the general prostitution of the labourer ...” Quoted by Lyotard in *Libidinal Economy*, 136.

positions and couplings; they have all these enter into the circle of transferable goods. They extend the quantity of parts of the labyrinthine band that can be evaluated and exchanged.¹²

Prostitution is celebrated not as exploitation, but as a perversion which is both sexual and mercantile; a liberation of sexuality from the closed circuits of reproduction and the family which allows it to enter into polymorphous transformations, in which there is a greater yield of intensity across the social body.

An important issue at stake in Lyotard's examination of capitalism is the question of the *limit* of this system. Marx proposes a limit beyond which there is an *external* other which is supposed to pre-exist capitalism, and which he seek to restore. This external limit revolves around the distinction between use-value (assumed to be natural) and exchange-value (designated as corruption), and in particular the application of this distinction to labour power. Marx argues that the origin of the surplus value that capitalists need in order to profit, and that the capitalist system needs in order to grow, comes from the discrepancy between the use-value and exchange-value of the labour force (that is, capitalists exploit workers by paying them lower wages than their labour is worth). Marx's economic analyses suggest that this discrepancy is destined to increase, driving capitalism's contradictions to crisis and bringing about its collapse.

Noting that there has been little evidence of Marx's prediction having come to fruition, Lyotard, as we have seen, characterises it as a phantasy of the restoration of the full organic body. In opposition to this model Lyotard proposes an alternative which forms the basis of his libidinal economy of capital. Instead of an external limit, pre-existing the capitalist system, Lyotard proposes that this limit is *internally* produced by the system itself, setting up a distinction between the supposed inside and outside which is in fact never stable, but is constantly shifting. (This is analogous in Freudian terms to the way that the distinction between the inside and the outside of the body is not originary, from a psychical point of view, but arises through the filtering of impulses.) In the case of the capitalist system, the limits are the customs borders of the nation or empire, and what lies beyond the borders is the source of the energy the system needs in order to feed its growth (surplus value) – new goods to be commodified and set to circulate on the interior, in the system of exchange, by being

¹² Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, 177.

marked with the universal equivalent that is price. This border needs to keep shifting (moving westward, as he will write in *Pacific Wall*) because once commodified, the energy of goods is limited and subject to annihilation by the very law of equivalence that allows them to circulate.

Capitalism, however, is founded on the same phantasy of the organic body as its Marxist critique. In this case, the idea of healthy reproduction in the organic body of capital is associated with that of well-regulated growth (that is, economic growth which is predictable, reliable, and maintains the social body in a state of wealth and prosperity). However, this is a phantasy because, as we have seen, the system needs an exterior as the source of surplus value in order to grow, and the introduction of energy from the exterior is always prone to *destabilising* the system. The capitalist system seeks out energies beyond its borders which, brought within, both nourish and destabilise it, and which it thus both desires and fears.

Liotard presents capitalism as just as natural (or at least, no more unnatural) than the oppositional models Marxists oppose to it (as analysed in *Libidinal Economy*, Baudrillard's idea of "primitive" societies governed by an economy of symbolic exchange). He rejects the phantasy of an organic body, present in both capitalism and Marxism, in favour of an affirmation of any society as necessarily a polymorphously perverse body, composed of partial drives. In fact, as the figure of prostitution is supposed to show, capitalism is a particularly perverse social body insofar as it invests any and all regions with libidinal value. What matters politically, for Lyotard, is not the attempt to achieve the desire of the organic body, but rather the opposite: to affirm libidinal intensity as polymorphous perversity in the system. In some ways, this comes close to a celebration of capitalism insofar as Lyotard presents it as a system rife with intense desires. However, the key characteristic of the libidinal economy of capital is in fact *duplicity*, meaning that both the cultivation of intensity and its annulment are present and co-implicated as necessary features of the system. Capitalism produces intensity through its seeking out of new energies and investments, but dampens these intensities by subjecting them to the law of exchange. In libidinal terms, the energies in the capitalist system are subject to the principles of both Eros and Thanatos, both regulation and deregulation, and both necessarily together, entwined. *How* energies operate in structures (*dispositifs*) in systems and structures is however variable, and the politics Lyotard advocates is one of acting *in* the system in order combat what he calls its nihilism – its tendencies to annul intensity – and to maximise perversion, libidinal flow, and energetic

transformation of structures; to provoke sterile intensities which, instead of feeding back into the (re)productive system of exchange, “explode and die away like stars in the universe.”¹³

White Skin, Black Cock: Economies of Race and Sex

Let us turn now to Lyotard’s considerations of race, sex, and imperialism in his idiosyncratic little book *Pacific Wall*. A mash-up of philosophy, fiction, biography, and art criticism, it is a dissimulatory and paradoxical text. It is described in its own pages as belonging to the literary genre, thanks to its obsessive personal dreamscape, and its evident debt to writers such as Michel Butor and Michel Vachez (with whose *Toil* it was initially published as a kind of preface). It distances the views it expresses from Lyotard’s own through the well-worn literary device of presenting the substance of the text as a found manuscript of another author, while the real author masquerades as editor. The main body of the text is supposedly written by someone called Vachez, who claims to be a European visiting professor at the University of California, San Diego, in the years 1972-3. The text presents reflections on his own status as a foreigner in California, and general speculations on the roles of sexual desire and race in a global world with America at its heart.¹⁴

In Lyotard’s “editorial conclusion” to the book, its conceptual difficulties and apparent inconsistencies are self-consciously expressed as follows:

Do you suppose there’s any point to be made out of what he calls whiteness when it’s said that his whiteness is too black and that, though peripheral, it resides at the center of Empire, that it acts as a system of coordinates for all displacements while remaining sheer mobility ...?¹⁵

Such conceptual convolutions might be approached through the biographical context with which we began. Like many other French philosophers of his generation, Lyotard was concerned with the problem of difference, and how to think difference in a non-dialectical manner. Yet Lyotard’s concerns were led by a particular political exigency, which marks

¹³ Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, 178.

¹⁴ The visiting professor was of course Lyotard himself. If not before, the game is well and truly given away by the appearance of the character “Andrea,” someone that Lyotard, acting the editor, claims not to have been able to identify, but was the name of his wife at the time (page 41).

¹⁵ Lyotard, *Pacific Wall*, 54.

them out from the more abstract theoretical concerns of his contemporaries. For Lyotard the dialectic was not simply a philosophical problem, but a problem of political engagement which concerns both theory and practice. Lyotard's abandonment of doctrinaire Marxism presented him with a peculiarly difficult problem, because of the sophistication of dialectical thinking itself. Finding an alternative to Marxism could not be simply a matter of adopting a new position, because the dialectic seems already to trump all positions, easily turning them into *oppositions* which appear as only partial, one-sided truths that can be accounted for in its own meta-level analysis, which imposes a higher meaning by subordinating them to a historical unfolding. The question Deleuze addresses in 1962 in *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, then – that of a thinking of difference beyond the dialectic – became for Lyotard in the 1960s and 70s a question of how to orient political theory and practice beyond dialectical materialism.

A first “solution” to this problem was found in “drift” (*dérive*), then in a violent attempt to exorcise himself of the belief in dialectical materialism through the active nihilism of libidinal economy, an attempt to which *Pacific Wall* largely belongs. What initially appear to be the confusing permutations and reversals of its concepts is an attempt to employ a differential logic which is not dialectical; which does not deploy oppositions, even in a dynamic way such that their differences could ultimately be accounted for on the ledger sheet of historical development. This notion of difference takes its inspiration from Freud, and the peculiar logic of the unconscious, which “knows no negation.”¹⁶ The book's concepts – such as the central one of white skin, which we will examine shortly – must be understood not as indicating stable and definable identities, based on oppositions, but as indexing a series of possible transformations. It is these transformations, which attempt to follow the ambiguity of desire and the vicissitudes of the drives, which give rise to the apparent contradictions of the book. As such, it is not only challenging, but it would be somewhat counter-productive, to attempt an exhaustive reading which would present all of the terms and their relations rising in the book according to a fixed structure. The ideas and figures of the book present, at most, an open system, whose terms are meant not to be fixed, but subject to further transformations, extensions, and erasures. What follows then is a partial picture which I hope will orient a reading of *Pacific Wall*, but not serve as a replacement for an encounter with it. With these methodological observations orienting us, we may now turn to the book's substance.

¹⁶ The text Lyotard obsessively refers to on this point is Freud's 1915 paper “The Unconscious.”

The structuring contention of *Pacific Wall* is the idea that an analogy may be drawn between America and the Roman Empire (an observation which Lyotard acknowledges lacks much originality). The Empire that America represents is associated with global capitalism; Lyotard calls it “Amerikapital.”¹⁷ Above, in the outline of the libidinal economy of capital, we saw the model of a system with a circumscribed region, delimiting inside and outside, in which energies circulate according to both centripetal and centrifugal forces: the former draw in energy from the outside, providing the system with surplus value and allowing it to grow, while the latter arises from the fear that these forces are destabilising and seek to push them back to the exterior. We see this basic model repeated in *Pacific Wall*, but in relation to energies and desires invested in sexual, racial, and cultural difference, as much as in financial capital. The analogy mentioned above paints America as the contemporary global Empire, with California at its centre, and outer-lying regions – including Europe, the old centre of Empire – as the source of external energies which must nourish the centre. Empire is described as the West, which continually displaces its borders, moving further westward, annexing new regions but also abandoning regions, disinvesting them so that they might return to the outside (for later re-incorporation). As with the description of the libidinal economy of capital, Empire conceives of itself according to a phantasy of being an organic body with a fixed central identity, despite the differential forces it in fact requires to nourish it (Empire would not be Empire without new conquests, just as capitalism cannot function without perpetual growth). Viewing the two models together, contemporary global capitalism might be seen as a colonialism continued by other means in a supposedly postcolonial world.

Pacific Wall’s central concept is “white skin.” In his intellectual autobiography *Peregrinations*, Lyotard relates this concept to various others he developed: the ephemeral skin and the libidinal band of *Libidinal Economy*, the paradoxical hinge of *Duchamp’s TRANS/formers*, the linguistic space of *The Differend*, and the “blank” of his commentary on Arakawa (and those, we might add, on Guiffrey).¹⁸ The French term is *blanc*, and its range of meanings help us see the associations between these concepts (which might otherwise remain opaque). It can refer to the colour white, to the “blankness” of an erased or empty space, and also to the uncomfortable feeling of hesitation which follows a misunderstanding in

¹⁷ Lyotard, *Pacific Wall*, 9.

¹⁸ Lyotard, *Peregrinations*, 31. The commentary on Arakawa may be found in *What to Paint?*, and those on Guiffrey in *Miscellaneous Texts II*.

conversation, the pause before moving forward (this last meaning links the work on language in *The Differend* to the works on visual artists).

In Freudian terms, white skin is uncathectic energy – a surplus of libido not tied to investment in any particular region or thing, but existing as potential to invest. White skin is also *blank* skin – a space in which there are no determinate negations giving rise to fixed figures, forms, institutions, or identities of any kind. It indicates an open space-time in which there are no identities, only transformations. In this respect, Lyotard describes white skin by invoking images of the beaches and white skies of California, as well as the smooth expanses of skin on white women's bodies. Yet white skin is also described as “articulations,” as having parts with relations between them. It is a positive space in which different things impossibly coexist without, or in spite of, contradictions and incompatibilities, without immediately giving rise to oppositions. In short, white skin is another name for libido – it is white-hot intensity, a “blankness” without distinction, which is simultaneously the space of pure positivity, of *everything* existing impossibly (just as Deleuze and Guattari's “smooth space” is not simply empty or unarticulated space, but a patchwork.¹⁹

From a metaphysical point of view, white skin is described as white because it is pure potential, containing all colours within itself, which in a general sense means all possible forms and figures that could be invested with libidinal energy. But in *Pacific Wall*, this becomes the starting point for a politics of race and sex, where white skin is first of all the skin of “the most Western of European-descended American women.”²⁰ White skin is also capital itself, the potential to invest anything with value and circulate it on the market. This is why Lyotard designates white skin as the heart of Empire – and also because it brings what it has invested in the most diverse regions into its heart, all colours mix together in white, like the multiculturalism of California.

Just as in his general description of the libidinal economy, Lyotard posits the “theatrical volume” as an inevitable transformation in the economy of Empire, in which the positivity and fluidity of white skin hollows out and forms a space of lack. We will see how in the descriptions of affects below, bodies are constituted as theatres through lust, jealousy, and

¹⁹ See Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, chapter 14.

²⁰ Lyotard, *Pacific Wall*, 7.

revenge. Yet desire can and does also transform itself in the opposite direction, lack flowing back into positivity, identity back into difference. Lyotard describes this with the figure of the “labyrinth,” which “isn’t some complicated construction where you get lost – it’s the body’s capacity to undo its own apparent voluminousness, to devaginate itself.”²¹ The labyrinth indicates that the body – any body – is composed of positive libido, of intensities, towards which it may return from its theatricality. The economy of Empire is thus drawn towards two gravitational centres, one of fixed identity and one of fluid difference. In the chapter of *Pacific Wall* entitled “The Labyrinth at the Center,” Lyotard indicates how the centre of Empire is a labyrinth, the capacity of capital to undo itself despite how much it seeks to accumulate: “Empire fears its center because it isn’t a center at all but an undulation of incomprehensible articulations, a labyrinth of vain paths, measureless delights. Which endlessly are thrown out to a periphery.”²² In terms of the libidinal economy of capital we saw in the previous section, white skin is both a site of attraction, because it is the capacity to invest lusted after by the capitalist, and of abhorrence, because it resists the predictable machinery of the reproduction of capital. It is both the supposedly grounded and fixed identity of Empire, and the fluidity at its heart.

Pacific Wall describes the main roles at play in the libidinal economy of Empire in terms of prostitution, as those of *prostitute*, *client*, and *pimp*. These roles are given a primary sexual and racial description: pimps are white men, prostitutes are white women, and clients are black men (foreigners). White men are the imperialists, white women their daughters, and the clients are citizens of colonies or nations at the periphery of Empire. These later are the “others” of Empire, most often described by Lyotard as “greasy foreigners,” but also as Indians, wetbacks, “negroes, greeks, jews, arabs, chicanos, dagos. All of them dark.”²³ The relations between these three roles are described in libidinal terms as follows. White skin – that of white American women – is desired by the clients. This desire is simultaneously sexual (and Lyotard describes this in no uncertain terms – “White girls act amazed if as sometimes happens swarthy eyes and fingers make bold to slip off panties or feel dampened furrows ...”²⁴) and political – it is desire for economic and cultural power thought to reside at the heart of the Empire, and obtainable through the possession of Empire’s most valuable

²¹ Lyotard, *Pacific Wall*, 30.

²² Lyotard, *Pacific Wall*, 42.

²³ Lyotard, *Pacific Wall*, 22.

²⁴ Lyotard, *Pacific Wall*, 20.

commodity, white woman. White men act as pimps for white women, offering them to black men (clients) but only on their terms, at a price they fix.

White woman is smooth white skin, a continuous surface; she is self-sufficient and her own skin can bring her to orgasm. She presents herself as innocent, but “as a power to inflame,” Lyotard writes, “she is all sex.”²⁵ She arouses desire in black man, which constitutes him as voluminous depth by instituting desire as lack at his heart. His body becomes organised by this feeling of lack and a sexual aim; an identity is imposed on him. His lust for white woman is simultaneously jealousy, because white woman remains the property of the white man who pimps her – he can “rent” white woman, on white man’s terms, but not own her. This arouses a desire for revenge, which Lyotard describes libidinally as rape, the penetration of white skin which forces it to invaginate and become a voluminous body, its self-sufficiency invaginating to form a hollow spaces around a central lack. He writes: “How to describe the lust for violation that rouses a greasy foreign dick? ... violating touch seeks (through excitation) to bring the organism into existence so its security is destroyed.”²⁶

White women and their foreigner clients, however, have a power – their own sexuality – which the pimps cannot fully control. This leads to an account of *racism* in libidinal terms, as the jealousy of those who are most powerful in the Empire (whites) of the very ones who are jealous of them (blacks). The following passes for something of a definition: “Racism is the jealousy an imperial name feels for names of whatever’s different, for names of migratory nations. It’s also a jealousy each of these nations has for its sisters since any jealousy will produce Empire.”²⁷ In Lyotard’s libidinal terms jealousy is felt by any part of the libidinal band for another part which is more strongly invested, or more intense. While the white imperialists can claim most power in the Empire, they nevertheless remain jealous of a virility, a fluid power of investment, they suppose foreigners to possess, and this jealousy can transform into fear, hate, and a desire for revenge on their own part.

Many of the above themes are condensed and further developed in the primary “example” of the book, that of the artist Edward Kienholz’s installation at Documenta 5, *Five Car Stud*. It presents the scene of a lynching. In the glow of car headlights, white sculpted figures hold

²⁵ Lyotard, *Pacific Wall*, 20.

²⁶ Lyotard, *Pacific Wall*, 21.

²⁷ Lyotard, *Pacific Wall*, 9.

down a black man, while a white woman sits in a near-by truck (the implication is that they have been found together in some kind of supposedly illicit liaison). The white figures are frozen in the act of castrating the black man. The latter's abdomen is a basin filled with water, in which float letters spelling out the word "nigger." On Lyotard's reading, the white pimps are extracting revenge for the supposed taking of a white woman by a black man without him paying the price they believe they are owed. In castrating him, the whites are expressing their belief in their own exclusive right to maleness, to virility, and their fear and jealousy of a virility they cannot control. They are imposing an identity on the black man ("nigger") in order to circumvent and control the fluidity he represents.

Lyotard makes much of the fact that in Kienholz's sculpture, the body of the black man and those of the white men do not exist independently – they are parts of the same supporting structure. The implication for him is that the blackness of the black man is a construction of white jealousy and fear. The black man's liquid belly (filled from a faucet in his cock) is the fluidity they fear, but this fluidity is also white skin, the labyrinth at the heart of Empire. The whites thus project onto a supposed other what they fear at their own heart. What this shows is the co-dependency of power and subjugation, and the reversibility of white skin. Lyotard suggests that perhaps some spectators imagine others to be ex-Nazis, confronted by their shameful racist past (the exhibition was held in Germany). They start fantasizing about the culpability of the Germans, and immediately the positions shift – those that blame become white imperialists, and the Germans are stained with blackness. Any relative fixity in racial and cultural position is thus subject to its potential transformation into its supposed other, and race relations takes place in a highly fluid and ambivalent economy. There is perhaps no better example of this ambivalence than Lyotard's recognition of white skin, as a figure of libido, on the polymorphous dance floor of a gay African-American disco, where gyrating black bodies flickered under strobe lighting, dancing to Barry White.²⁸

Inconclusions

All I have been able to do here is to introduce, and hopefully shed some light on, some of the ideas we find in Lyotard's texts, which themselves remain only a sketch of issues pertinent to

²⁸ Lyotard, *Pacific Wall*, 41-2.

the postcolonial situation from a libidinal economic perspective. At the risk of dramatic oversimplification, what might say schematically that the distinctiveness of Lyotard's work is that in focusing on feelings and desires, he provides a perspective on the postcolonial alternate to those which foreground consciousness (such as the Hegelianism of Sartre, Fanon, or more recent theories of recognition) or language and signs (such as the deconstructivism and culturalism which reigned in the 80s and 90s and inflects some of the most well-known postcolonial theory). While Lyotard never presents this work himself under the name of the "postcolonial," as my biographical introduction indicated, Lyotard's libidinal approach to the political itself stemmed from his experience with decolonial struggles in Africa, so it is not so much of a stretch to link them back with postcolonial concerns, and also specifically with Africa, today. I cannot draw out such implications here, but let me end, in an inconclusive way, with some brief suggestions of the potential uses, but also limitations, of Lyotard's work.

Pacific Wall presents us with very little in the way of political prescriptions. Taking the politics of *Libidinal Economy* into account, however, we may suspect that Lyotard would not seek to oppose the prostitution *Pacific Wall* describes with some kind of restoration of an organic political body with its reproductive rights restored to it, but rather a generalization and extension of prostitution and perversion which would take the side of the prostitutes and the clients to freely exercise their sexuality beyond the control of the pimps. We also know from *Libidinal Economy* that the only prescription in the libidinal politics of this period is to maximize intensity. And yet, we might also take from *Pacific Wall* a certain politics of difference. Lyotard's politics was resolutely for the struggles of minorities, of women, homosexuals, blacks, and so on, while at the same time taking a form different to that of the politics of identity and representation. For Lyotard, what is at stake in such struggles is not a matter of correct recognition and representation, since this simply displaces the problem, which is the machinery of capital/Empire itself, that brings with it inevitable "otherings" and exclusions. The dynamic of the system Lyotard describes depends on the setting up of borders and the distribution of roles, while the system itself remains indifferent to who or what takes these roles. A politics of representation and identity, then, might be suspected of being complicit with the dynamic according to which new identities are brought into the centre, only to expel others to the periphery. Representing certain sexualities, certain racial or cultural identities as "legitimate" not only excludes others as less legitimate (or entirely

invisible), but inhibits the free flow of desire, the formation of new sexualities, new races, and new cultures.

There is much in the fraught contemporary political landscape which Lyotard's libidinal perspective seems well able to describe. A few examples: the scares over immigrant "rape gangs" which litters the tabloid press might be seen as the fear of foreigners taking what they desire without paying the price we demand. Trumpism, a politics which occults the mobility of the social body by assuming its central identity and proposing that it is attacked only from without. A sleazy white Emperor who flaunts his pasty, vulgar sexuality and so reassures the pimps of their rights to own, to enjoy, and to sell only at the price they set. A colonialism we are right to suspect has not really ended in Africa, as former colonial powers such as France continue to exert their influence through financial regulation and military intervention, and new world powers such America and China eagerly invest. From a libidinal perspective, decolonization might be seen as the disinvestment of regions which returns them to the exterior of the system only to renew their capacity to provide the interior of the Empire with new energies to exploit.

As for the limitations of Lyotard's approach, we should firstly note that there are many apparent problems and dangers with Lyotard's analysis which would stem from an over-hasty reaction. Taken too literally – for example, as a thesis about empirical individuals – Lyotard's analysis presents a host of ethical problems, for example, what might look like blaming the female victim in cases of rape, suggesting that it is only foreigners who (can) rape, or that white men can only ever view women as commodities. As we have noted, there is also a celebration of prostitution (no doubt designed to provoke). While we should remain critically aware of such problematic aspects, we also need to recognise the register in which the analysis is offered – in the fantasy space-time of drives and their vicissitudes, not in the realm of fully-constituted individuals with fixed identities. There is anything but an essentialism implied in such descriptions, which indicate distributions of relations, capable of transformation. (Lyotard's statements – such as: "If your dick happens to be black, you don't exist. Only white has existence. And white's a woman."²⁹ – should be understood as limited to a certain perspective, or as a description of distributions of affects on a limited part of the

²⁹ Lyotard, *Pacific Wall*, 20.

libidinal band.) One of the stakes of *Pacific Wall* is in fact to destabilise racial and sexual identities, to see them as products of relations of desire rather than fixed categories.

A significant hesitation we must be aware of, however, is Lyotard's own. The publication of *Pacific Wall* in 1975 was in fact proximate to a threshold in Lyotard's work, which he was in the process of crossing, and after which his thought and writing would significantly change. Methodologically and stylistically, Lyotard would abandon libidinal economics in favour of a pragmatics of language. His key motivation for this abandonment of the libidinal perspective was a recognition that it cannot adequately respond to problems of *justice*. As we have seen, the values which animate this philosophy revolve around an affirmation of intensity, but indulge an indifference regarding the *kinds* of affects and desires that are affirmed. This concern took Lyotard back to the problem of judgement, which he developed in the later '70s and '80s. He explains his recognition of the problems of libidinal economy in *Peregrinations* as follows:

Unfortunately, following nothing but the intensities of affects does not allow us to separate the wheat from the chaff. Because everything has value according to its energetic force, the law might not exist and the monk might be really a devil [...] the polymorphic paganism of exploring and exploiting the whole range of intensive forms could easily be swept away into lawful permissiveness, including violence and terror.³⁰

We should not take Lyotard's own dismissal of his works of the *Libidinal Economy* period at face value, as some early English language interpreters tended to do.³¹ Yet any reconsideration today of this work must at least take his own hesitations into account.

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³⁰ Lyotard, *Peregrinations*, 15.

³¹ In particular Geoffrey Bennington and Bill Readings, whose books introduced Lyotard's *oeuvre* to the English-speaking public. James Williams' *Lyotard and the Political* presents an important challenge to the assumption that Lyotard's later work is politically superior to his earlier, and argues for a "revaluation" of *Libidinal Economy*.

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