

*Refusing the White Dream: Anti-adaptation and Black America*

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This paper addresses the tensions between American ego psychology, a practice based on adaptation, and Lacanian psychoanalysis, a technique for social critique. I highlight the ways in which critical psychoanalytic theory works toward a theorization of social movements that underscores their potential to dismantle race-based systems of dispossession. Specifically, I focus on the recent uprising in West Baltimore following the death of Freddie Gray, an unarmed black man killed while in police custody. Turning to Martin Luther King Jr.'s address to the American Psychological Association in 1967, I elaborate on his notion of "creative maladjustment" to reject the media's depiction of the Baltimore uprising as indicative of pathology within the community. Instead, through a critical psychoanalytic lens, I theorize the event as conducive to ethical social change. Through King's notion of "creative maladjustment" and a Lacanian notion of ethics, I contend that the Baltimore protestors have directly challenged the normalcy of structural racism, initiating a transformation in America's approach to race-based dispossession, state violence, and mass-incarceration.

*Keywords:* Martin Luther King Jr., Freddie Gray, Baltimore, psychoanalysis, urban uprising

Recent urban uprisings in Ferguson and Baltimore, condemning the murder of black Americans by police officers, have drawn national attention to the state-supported dispossession and violence faced by poor black communities in cities across America. Focusing on the protests in West Baltimore following the death of Freddie Gray, a black man killed while in police custody, I suggest that these events express a collective rejection of norms prescribing social adaptation. Protesters' actions have brought to light the injustices that sustain white privilege; this has led to a wide-spread national interrogation and critique of previously unacknowledged systems of structural racism. Martin Luther King Jr.'s notion of "creative maladjustment" and Lacanian psychoanalysis clarify how events in Baltimore have contributed to a political transformation of systems of race-based dispossession, state violence, and mass-incarceration. Through a psychoanalytic reading of the situation, I counter mainstream media narratives of the riots as self-destructive and politically counterproductive.

I begin with an elaboration of psychoanalysis' potentially subversive theorization of social change, as presented in Lacanian ethics and in Martin Luther King Jr.'s 1967 speech to the American Psychological Association. King and Lacan's seemingly divergent approaches come together in a shared emphasis on the ethical necessity of rejecting the idealization of social normalcy. Lacanian theories of ethics and Martin Luther King Jr.'s notion of "creative maladjustment" help to make sense of the anti-adaptive position taken-up by the participants of the West Baltimore uprising. Rejecting an adaptively focused ego psychology theorization of social and political transformation, I instead affirm the usefulness of psychoanalysis as a lens for social critique.

The Baltimore uprising of April 2015 began just days following the death of Freddie Gray, an unarmed black man killed while in the custody of the Baltimore Police Department.

Participants expressed exasperation and sorrow over Gray's death at the hands of the police. Many involved in the demonstrations voiced a deep awareness of the structural violence and racism that led to Gray's death (Coates 2015b; Hazzard 2015). In this state of heightened consciousness concerning systemic injustice, frustration grew, and citizens in West Baltimore, where Gray lived and was later arrested, began to destroy property and take items from nearby stores and a local mall. In what follows, I will refer to these events as riots, as events disruptive of routine social functioning. I will interpret these events as acts of political refusal. The actions of rioters can be read as a radical "No!" to the demands of a society dependent upon the exploitation and incarceration of black citizens. In forsaking calls to continue protesting in "acceptable" and "non-violent" ways, rioters enacted a refusal to adapt to the system responsible for the deprivation and incarceration of so many members of their communities.

Such a refusal to adjust to an injurious social system characterizes the ethical act, as it is theorized in radical forms of psychoanalysis. A defiant "No" is deeply embedded in the principles of Lacanian psychoanalysis, a practice that encourages a rejection of adjustment and adaptation. Turning to the work of Lacanian Alenka Zupančič, I will show how this bold stance depends upon a willingness to encounter disruptions that free the self from social constraints that deaden its ability to thrive.

In an interview with an Italian magazine in 1974, Lacan publicly decried the therapeutic trends he saw developing in American psychoanalytic circles. He warned of the dangers of conceiving of psychoanalysis as adaptive therapy, as a means to adjust the self to an imagined normal sociality, claiming that such practices were far from what Freud had envisioned for the practice of psychoanalysis. Lacan told the interviewer, "After his [Freud's] death in 1939, some of his students also claimed to be exercising a different kind of psychoanalysis by reducing his

teachings to a few banal formulas: technique as a ritual, practice restricted to treating people's behavior, as a means of re-adapting the individual to his social environment. This is the negation of Freud: a comforting salon psychoanalysis" (1974). Such incarnations of the practice would serve only to dull the critical edge of psychoanalysis and thus its force as a practice aimed at cultivating resistance toward normative circumscription.

Lacan criticized ego psychology's focus on enriching the self's capacity to adapt to its environment. Perhaps he had in mind analysts like Heinz Hartmann whose work outlines a therapeutic protocol for adjusting the self and the environment in unison, to achieve a greater harmony between the two. In contrast, Lacan proclaimed that to become well-adjusted was a goal antithetical to the original intentions of Freudian psychoanalysis. In opposition to therapeutic practices that focus on an accommodating stance toward social norms, Lacan and his followers pursue a form of psychoanalysis based on a continual attentiveness to the aspects of social existence that the self consciously or unconsciously rebels against. This form of analysis highlights the ways in which attentiveness to lack and discord enables the amelioration of social-political injustice by encouraging actors to resist rather than adapt to harmful social structures.

Lacanian Alenka Zupančič adheres to a critical rather than adaptive form of psychoanalysis in her study of comedy as a potential practice of insurrection. Her depiction of comedy as endemic to the analytic situation—a site where one cultivates critical social awareness—helps explain how anti-adaptive forms of political protest can foster social change. Zupančič draws from Hegel's Section on Religion in the *Phenomenology* to discuss the shifts that comedy produces in the Other,<sup>1</sup> that is in the social practices and language of everyday life. Zupančič suggests that in this section, Hegel makes an important turn away from the purview of self-consciousness, and toward the "consciousness-raising' of the Absolute itself" (Zupančič

2008, 14). In other words, Zupančič indicates that in this part of the *Phenomenology*, Hegel moves away from his concern with self-consciousness—the self’s awareness that it exists as an entity that can reflect on and create change in the outside world (Hegel, 1977 § 166-67)—to a concern for how the world comes to recognize the role of selves in its creation.

It is not enough for self-consciousness to *know* that the Absolute does not exist without it, to know that it partakes and contributes to the world. The Absolute itself, the Other, must also come to realize “that it does not exist (outside the concrete consciousness of people and of the world)” (Zupančič 2008, 16). Both the wider social world and the social self must come to realize that they are mutually incomplete. Zupančič suggests that, starting from the self-consciousness of the Absolute, Hegel articulates a form of free agency dependent not upon individual consciousness and its fit with the Absolute, but on the mutual realization of their shared incompleteness.

This particular reading deepens Hegel’s better-known understanding of freedom as dependent upon the “concrete identity of the good with the subjective will” (Zupančič 2008, 152). For Hegel, such an identity necessitates the self’s robust participation in the ethical source from which its subjectivity springs. Free agency requires participation in the conditions that enable human freedom, that is, in the ethical community and eventually the state. This would mean self-consciousness has realized its role in the creation of the Absolute, in the world of the Other. In this reading of Hegelian freedom, the emphasis is on how self-consciousness sees the Absolute, on how self-consciousness sees its role in creating the conditions of its freedom.

Hegel seems to suggest an alternative vision of freedom in his Section on Religion. Here, Hegel turns to focus on how the Absolute comes to see itself as incomplete and contingent on the actions of self-consciousness. Zupančič introduces a Lacanian challenge to readings of the

Hegelian self as free only in its realization of unity with its world. Rather than reading Hegel as suggesting that freedom requires harmonization between the self and its world, she finds in Hegel an assertion of the importance of the mutual lack in both entities, their sense of alienation from each other but also their absolute dependence upon one another. It is consciousness of mutual lack and alienation rather than an idealization of harmony that facilitates free action.

This crucial alienation, or ill fit, the defining element of the Lacanian subject-world relation, generates *movement*. For Hegel, this agitation is the becoming of the dialectic, and for Lacan, it is the force of desire that engenders a shift in the Other. “This is why,” Zupančič claims, “for both Hegel and Lacan, the real point at which something in this relationship can be effectively shifted is not the abolition of Otherness, or its absorption into the subject, but the coincidence of the lack in the subject with the lack in the Other” (2008, 17). The shift comes from the “encounter of the two entities at a very precise (or precisely right) point of their topology. This is a short circuit of internal and external, not an elimination of the one or the other” (Zupančič 2008, 17). Rather than the realization of harmony between the self and the world, it is the zeroing in on their mutual deficiency that generates a shift in the social matrix. The basis of social change lies in the fractious nature of the self-world relationship.

Yannis Stavrakakis’ study of the political implications of Lacan’s work clarifies how this productive point of contact arises. He explains that the parallel lack in the subject and the lack in the social exist due to the realities of signification.<sup>ii</sup> Because language ultimately fails to depict uniqueness, given that it can only exist at a communicable level of abstraction, social significations always fall short of portraying, with exact precision, what they seek to represent. In this sense, the world of social meaning expresses a lack in extensiveness akin to the lack in the desiring subject. While the subject might seek to identify with a collective signification, “the lack

on the objective level means that every such identification is only reproducing the lack in the subject,” objective meanings “being incapable of providing the lost real fullness of the individual subject” (Stavrakakis 1999, 41). Yet, rather than ensuring only a deficient existence, the lacking nature of both the social-self and the social-collective actually allows the subject a degree of freedom. As Žižek notes, “without this lack in the Other, the Other would be a closed structure and the only possibility open to the subject would be his radical alienation in the Other” (1989, 137). However, because this lack *does* exist, the social is an open system capable of transformation.

This crucial space of interlocking lack endows the subject with free agency, with the ability to transform signification at the social and subjective level. It is precisely by identifying with this lack in the Other that the subject acquires “a breathing space” which “enables him to avoid total alienation in the signifier” (Žižek 1989, 137). Alienation remains open to partial amelioration through shifts in the social-self relationship. Awareness and identification with this “breathing space” thus becomes crucial for the embodiment of an ethics meant to generate radical social change. Identifying with the lack in the social, staying with the feeling that the social “hasn’t got it, hasn’t got the final answer” (Žižek 1989, 137), allows the subject to remain open to its incompleteness rather than incessantly searching for ways to disavow its lack by participating in social fantasies of mastery and harmony that require the violent expulsion of otherness. Less inclined to overlook the force of detrimental social norms, the self identified with lack begins to see these norms as fantasies, as attempts to deflect otherness and loss. This critical awareness frees the self from much of the force of these fantasies and enables it to inhabit a position of autonomous thought and action, diverging from modes of “normalcy.” As I will show, some participants of the Baltimore riots expressed just such a critical awareness of the



fantastic nature of American ideals such as “legitimate” state violence, racial equality, and economic meritocracy, as well as a parallel unwillingness to carry on in faithfulness to these ideals.

Zupančič suggests that certain practices of psychoanalysis inspire such critical mindfulness by encouraging subjects to embrace their shared lack with the social and to defer tendencies to adjust the self to fit within a perceived “normal.” Designed to challenge the notion of interiorized selfhood, psychoanalysis, practiced as Freud intended, encourages an embodied change in both self and Other (the Absolute) at the point of their overlapping incompleteness. In psychoanalysis, it is not enough for the patient to come to know how her unconscious determines her actions, and thus to attempt “to change herself and her perception of the world” (Zupančič 2008, 17). Rather, the main goal of analysis is to incite a change in both subject and world, “to shift and change the very symbolic and imaginary structures in which this unconscious is embodied outside of herself, in the manner and rituals of her conduct, speech, relations to others...” (Zupančič 2008, 16). Psychoanalysis encourages a change in the material conditions of the self by means of “shifting external practices” (Zupančič 2008, 16) through their repetition.

In analysis, the patient repeatedly recounts her actions and all the things she perceives as “happening to her.” The analyst’s role is not to point out that she is in fact unconsciously responsible for these occurrences, but rather to allow her to encounter these incidents again and again. As the subject recalls the experiences of her social identity “functioning outside in the Other” (Zupančič 2008, 18), these experience begin to shift in meaning. In their repetition, they begin to seem more alien and less integral to the patient’s selfhood as they accrue layers of meaning that diverge from the patient’s original experiences. As Deleuze notes, repetition entails

a positive production of difference, and indeed, the analysand perceives a positive excess in these events over time (Zupančič 2008, 176).<sup>iii</sup>

Zupančič explains the significance of this production of symbolic excess by looking to the ways in which comedy weakens the authority of Master-Signifiers through their repetition. Žižek defines the Lacanian term “Master-Signifier” as an “empty signifier of symbolic authority” (2005, 290).<sup>iv</sup> An example would be the notion of “democracy” or “equality.” Both exist as ideals that we tend to accept uncritically, despite their incredible diversity in meaning and practice. They stand on the authority they evoke in themselves, rather than on their fit with social reality. They serve to tie together dissimilar and often contradictory meanings; yet, we rarely interrogate the inconsistency these terms suppress. Master-Signifiers operate to hold together our fantasies of social identity and cover over the arbitrary nature of their authority to determine our actions, thoughts, and beliefs.

Comedy callously displays Master-Signifiers as self-evident truths, in a manner that ironically broadcasts their insincerities. In comedy, “Master-Signifiers enter the scene...not to have the last word, but in order to be repeated there” (Zupančič 2008, 177), to have their inconsistencies exposed. An example of a comedic and subversive repetition of Master-Signifiers would be comedian Stephen Colbert’s repeated displays of intense patriotism on the show *The Colbert Report*. This repetition is comedic precisely because it threatens the stability of “America” as a Master-Signifier. Comedic repetition, like the repetition that occurs in the course of analysis, produces a surprise as it reveals the ridiculous, empty, and arbitrary character of Master-Signifiers.

Both comedy and psychoanalysis can operate to lessen the hold that Master-Signifiers have over us by pushing these structural points until they reveal the nonsensical excess that our

systems of thought inherently generate and then seek to contain. Mindful of the shifty and somewhat arbitrary nature of signification, we are less inclined to adhere so forcefully to social identities and socially accepted ways of thinking and acting. Never entirely in a position of mastery over the terms of her selfhood, the self begins to realize that the world never truly masters her.

The psychoanalytic encounter weakens the force of detrimental fantasies through the repetition of failed enactments of their promises. In the same vein, the everyday lives of many West Baltimoreans expose the emptiness of the fantasy of the American Dream. The riots, which took place in response to Gray's murder and the systemic conditions that lead to his death, *perversely conformed* to entrenched American ideals, exposing such ideals as insincere and dependent upon the impoverishment of black Americans.

The riots occurred in a context of police brutality and systemic dispossession (Friedersdorf 2015). They signaled an increasing refusal on the part of West Baltimoreans to adjust to police violence, mass-incarceration, and racist housing and regulatory policies—all manifestations of a system that works to maintain a high quality of life for white Americans (Coates 2014). The mainstream media, mostly discounting the context of the riots, portrayed them as everything from spectacular outbursts of destruction, slightly justified but overzealous actions of protest, to actions ruinous to the cause of ending police violence against black Americans. Every mainstream cable news channel highlighted the property destruction involved and the allegedly self-destructive nature of the rioters' actions (Abdul-Jabbar 2015; Lewis 2015; Myers 2015; Gorman 2015). Various Left-leaning news sources attempted to put the riots into context, exploring the conditions that gave rise to the occurrences—police violence and the inaction of courts to prosecute officers in cases involving the shooting of unarmed black citizens

(Patterson 2015; Short 2015; Gude 2015; Johnston 2015). Yet, the overwhelming response from the media was to report endlessly on the fires and looting that took place during the riots. The news coverage wildly emphasized the shocking and allegedly imprudent nature of the events, but failed to note the everyday situations that gave rise to the riots.

The paradigm represented in these media narratives betrays the deep-rooted denial of systemic violence that perpetuates systems of racial dispossession in American cities. Baltimore born writers Ta-Nehisi Coates and D. Watkins describe how the brutality of everyday life in East and West Baltimore exists as a byproduct of the social continuation and obscuration of white privilege. Constantly harassed by police, deprived of adequate schools, grocery stores, and community resources, many Baltimoreans struggle on a daily basis just to survive (Watkins 2015). All the while, white people, living in the very same city, gather at restaurants to applaud the new bars and coffee shops opening in their neighborhoods. Their condos, lofts, and yoga studios sit on property that might have been home to an apartment complex, and that might have become a site for affordable housing, a school, or a community center. Clueless about life on the “other side,” white Baltimoreans enjoy the city’s gentrification as “black history is bulldozed and replaced with Starbucks, Chipotles, and dog parks” (Watkins 2015, 60). The striking difference between these two Baltimores is neither a coincidence nor an unfortunate fact of life, but a consequence of a system *meant to* sustain a high quality of life for the privileged by denying the needs and rights of poor black Baltimoreans.

Coates describes how a continuous turning away from this ingrained system of racial injustice keeps the dream of white sovereignty alive. The adherents of the dream “must not just believe in it but believe that it is just, believe that their possession of the Dream is the natural result of grit, honor, and good works” (Coates 2015a, 98). Coates recounts how this process of

turning away is embedded in the American way of life, stating, “the mettle that it takes to look away from the horror of our prison system, from police forces transformed into armies, from the long war against the black body, is not forged overnight. This is the practiced habit of jabbing out one’s own eyes and forgetting the work of one’s hands” (Coates 2015a, 98). The dream of white self-sufficiency and justified entitlement, a dream that is inseparable from the American Dream, is sustained by practices of habitual forgetting. Predictably, from this amnesic viewpoint, a viewpoint rarely aware of its own status as a particular position, the Baltimore uprising appeared as a violent outbreak of destruction. In fact, the depiction in the media of the Baltimore protesters’ actions as irrational and self-destructive hints at the *ethical* nature of these very acts.

The rioters countered the media narratives of their actions precisely by *acting out* the ideals of mainstream America. Their actions of protest revealed the inconsistencies behind such Empty-Signifiers as “violence” and “looting” and “non-violence” and “ownership.” Reports on the violence and looting that occurred during the riots begin to sound rather insincere when accompanied by counter narratives that expose systemic police-violence and the realities of a consumer-culture predicated on systemic impoverishment.

The rioters acted to disprove the assumptions underling the discourse surrounding their communities and the riots themselves. They momentarily uprooted the notion that white privilege has nothing to do with black dispossession, that violence in black communities stems from internal issues, and that the strength of one’s work ethic determines one’s access to material sustenance.

I read the rioters’ looting as a form of practical (not necessarily intentional) social protest. These acts of taking perversely realize the rules of consumer culture. Work, according to a capitalist ethic, should be fairly remunerated. When work is not close to adequately waged or

does not even exist, only the second command of consumer capitalism can be followed.

Consume. The rioters, in taking what society had promised in exchange for labor, disclosed the insincerity of the ideal of the self-made man. Disrupting the rules of consumption by following them, the rioters exposed the falsity of the idea of equal access. They agreed to live by the ideal of equal access through the only means accessible to them, in the process uncovering the hollowness of any guarantee of equality through market forces.

In addition to erroneously being labeled simply destructive, when their actions have been *productively* disruptive, rioters are called “violent.” The fact that property destruction classifies as violence stands mostly unquestioned in mainstream public opinion. Even King suggests that riots are violent when discussing the looting and property destruction involved (1967, 2). Yet, King also notes that the “crimes” of the rioters are but “derivative crimes...born of the greater crimes of white society” (1967, 1). King’s words still ring true almost fifty years after his address: “White society, the “white man”, still “violates welfare laws to deprive the poor of their meager allotments; he flagrantly violates building codes and regulations; his police make a mockery of law; and he violates laws on equal employment and education and the provisions of civic services. The slums are the handiwork of a vicious system of the white society; Negroes live in them but do not make them any more than a prisoner makes a prison. Let us say boldly that if the violations of law by the white man in the slums over the years were calculated and compared with the law-breaking of a few days of riots, the hardened criminal would be the white man” (1967, 1). In the media’s portrayal of West Baltimore, it is evident that countless police shootings and the mass incarceration of black men and women signifies legitimate state force, while the burning of a few police cars and the looting of several pharmacies and liquor stores appears as senseless violence. In the dominant paradigm this seems valid. Yet, how long will this

logic hold, given the rioters' actions, given the awareness they have brought concerning the violence their communities face as an ordinary part of life?

In perversely acting in accordance with American ideals, the rioters made visible to others what they likely knew through experience. The American promise of equal rights, fairly compensated work, and respect for bodily integrity, life, and liberty lives only as a fantasy, supporting a system that operates to sustain great inequalities of social nourishment. The ideal of the self-made man, the individual shorn of all dependency, hides a system in which the dispossession of those deemed "other" sustains an illusion of sovereignty for the privileged few who are, in fact, quite *dependent* on their capacity to exploit. In attending to and prying open the crack in these fantasies, the incoherence between this social promise and their own reality, the rioters produced an excess, an unintelligible demand that society would be forced to attempt to decipher. In this manner, their actions, their enactment of discontent, stimulated a *change* in the Other.

This spirit of social critique, insisted upon by Lacanians and embodied in the actions of the protestors, follows directly from Freud's own conclusions regarding social-political life. Freud recognized that widespread *discontent*, rather than being a rare or absolutely undesirable condition, formed the very basis of modern society. He most famously claimed that civilization itself emerged through a process of growing discontent and resulting compensatory measures. He found, that through various psychic mechanisms, the sublimation of libido, the establishment of aim-inhibited erotic bonds, and the repression of natural aggressive inclinations, civilization grew both more magnificent and more oppressive (Freud 2010). Freud never suggested that the movement generated in discontent would be inherently progressive or desirable. Even the seemingly benevolent "commandment to love one's neighbor" (2010, 145), could in time, Freud

warned, put too much strain on a humankind's natural aggressive tendencies. While Freud recognized the value of the ethical commands of society, he always insisted upon their alienating character and the resulting necessity for their revision. Freud recognized the beneficial power of discontent, of remaining abnormal or ill adjusted in a society replete with detrimental and destructive moralities.

This emphasis on discontent, on remaining restless with respect to a damaging environment, produces a productive dissonance that can manifest as an impetus for social change. The force engendered by remaining receptive toward feelings of alienation discernible in the self's relation to normative existence, rather than refusing to acknowledge dissonance and hypocrisy, has incited and sustained countless movements against racist, gendered, and heteronormative systems of injustice.

In his 1967 address to the American Psychological Association, Martin Luther King Jr. called upon the creative power of the maladjusted to challenge racist systems of injustice that had been established by white society. In his speech, he acknowledged the importance of the social sciences to the Civil Rights Movement as a means to interrogate the ways black lives could be bettered, but criticized the adaptively focused analysis proffered by psychologists as a way of pathologizing black people in their actions of protest. Insisting on the reasonable and practical nature of such actions of dissent, given the context of their emergence, King claimed that riots specifically, rather than acts of *random* violence, were *intended* "to shock the white community" (1967, 1). He stated that in these actions, the black American, "knowing that this society cherishes property above people...is shocking it by abusing property rights" (King 1967, 1). While calling these shocking actions crimes, yet only in so much as "they are born of the greater crimes of white society" (1967, 1), King also alluded to their productive character, how



such actions called attention to the plight of black Americans. Quickly glossed over, for a turn to a more substantial discussion of civil disobedience, King's notion of "shock" resonates with the Lacanian claim that analytic encounters produce a surprising excess that facilitates the self's rejection and reevaluation of dominant social patterns. Such a notion of surprise retains immense value for our own era's resistances to racial injustice.

The Baltimore riots produced a shock, a challenge to illusions of white sovereignty that stand upon the dispossession of black Americans.<sup>v</sup> It was precisely the disruption of business as usual in West Baltimore that revealed the fictitious nature of white society's claim to self-determined subjectivity. The actions of the rioters, broadcasted across the world in the days following Gray's death, revealed the justified anger and pain of many citizens in West Baltimore, who have suffered for generations under racist systems of injustice. The socially acceptable disavowal of such systems has been irreparably jeopardized by the political refusal signified by the riots. The actions of the rioters have forced privileged communities to grapple with the reality of their dependence on the dispossession of black communities.

The enactment of discontent, as seen in Baltimore, forced a dissemination of contingency through which social change could become a positive reality. King's own assassination only months after his address to the A.P.A. triggered riots on the streets of Baltimore (Lewis 2015), riots decrying the effacement of the murders of black Americans. In April 2015, people poured into the streets once more to enact their ethical discontent. I am not suggesting that these riots lack historical particularity, that they can be easily equated with one another. Yet, I find in both events, an agential refusal to adjust to an unjust society.

In the conclusion of his address, King affirmed the power of a refusal to adjust to racism, designating this refusal "creative maladjustment" (1967, 3). Wielding their own term

“maladjusted” against those psychologists who would use it to malign the actions of the black community, King insisted on the beneficent nature of remaining at odds with a society intent on the exploitation of its black population. He expressed his intention to challenge the norm of adjustment, stating to his largely white audience:

I am sure there are some things in our world, to which we should never be adjusted. There are some things concerning which we must always be maladjusted if we are to be people of good will. We must never adjust ourselves to racial discrimination and racial segregation. We must never adjust ourselves to religious bigotry. We must never adjust ourselves to economic conditions that take necessities from the many to give luxuries to the few. We must never adjust ourselves to the madness of militarism, and the self-defeating effects of psychical violence (King 1967, 3).

The recent uprising in Baltimore has enacted just such an ethics of creative maladjustment. The riots, which were a point of focus for global news media for weeks, produced a simmering awareness that a key component of white privilege—the denial of dependence upon systems of racism—had been exposed in a rare and profound way. Consequently, many people turned to consider the cause and significance of the riots. In this search, surely they found legacies of state violence, economic exploitation, and social marginalization.

The uprising can be read as revealing that the accumulation of wealth in white society hinges upon policies, laws, norms, and unconscious micro-aggressions that maintain systems of structural racism (Coates 2014). The discontent expressed by the riots, while variously interpreted, contributed undeniable political momentum to considerations of race-based injustice in America. What unfolded in Baltimore drew widespread attention to the systemic societal issues that produced the warranted passion and anger portrayed in the rioters’ words and actions. The riots exposed the wounding normalcy of discontent in a society built on exploitation. As Freud suggests, faced with the spread of immense discontent, “may we not be justified in

reaching the diagnosis that, under the influence of some civilizations—possibly the whole of mankind—have become ‘neurotic’? (2010, 147). Under such conditions, under the influence of a country built on structural violence, the normatively “pathological” are the ones positioned to reveal the sicknesses of the society in which they are marginalized.

The situation in Baltimore testifies to the political and ethical worth of considering actors deemed maladjusted as symptomatic of a *pathological social system*. As Lacanian ethics suggests, such actors might indeed be ethically deviating from the norms of an ailing society in the interest of transforming the very conditions of their lives within it. This view of social change upends a therapeutic personal approach to social transformation, an approach that hails from the same traditions as the American ego psychology that Lacan decried as conservative and conformist. Such an adaptively focused view places the onus for social change onto the backs of individuals, while insisting upon the *potential* harmony between the self and its social world. This ideal of harmony matched with individual responsibility results in only miniscule and compensatory modifications to systems of injustice.

The power of maladjustment to evoke change attests to psychoanalysis’ claim that adaptation, rather than being the grounds for morality, bars the actualization of ethical comportment. Ethics entails forcing a change in the Other, at the points where the self feels most estranged from its world. The actions of Baltimore dissidents demonstrate the potential for such an ethics to facilitate radical social change. Yet, the force required to produce such a shift necessarily disrupts, often violently, the lives of those engaged in social upheaval. It would be irresponsible and appropriative to hold the riots up as a pillar of positive social change without attending to the true cost of these events for all involved.

The mainstream media narrative certainly underscored the “self-destructive” nature of the riots. However, it failed to bring to light the deeper meaning behind, and the implications of, such “self-destructive” acts. Lacan’s notion of ethics provides a way of reading what could be considered self-harm as a necessary corollary of true ethical action. Much of the American public was eventually willing to admit that the riots positively drew attention to the plight of West Baltimore. Yet, almost no one in mainstream media attempted to defend or to even consider the value of the rioters’ destruction of pharmacies and stores in their own communities. Public figures hurried to condemn the looting of stores, burning of buildings, and smashing of windows. Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake called the actions unwarranted and self-destructive, claiming, “I understand anger, but what we're seeing isn't anger... It's disruption of a community. The same community they say they care about, they're destroying...” (Myers and Foreman 2015). Cornell William Brooks, president of the NAACP, called for an end to the rioting, declaring: “burning businesses and homes and buildings in your own community is like putting a gun to your own head” (Gorman 2015). While some did defend the destructive actions as productive in raising awareness, few appeared to disagree with the claim that the rioters were guilty of self-harm. On this point, these criticisms *correctly* recognize the nature of the rioters’ actions as seen from a particular position. The riots damaged local small businesses, destroyed needed pharmacies, and temporarily increased the crime-rate in the area (Anderson 2015). How then could one ever defend the rioters’ actions as productive?

In Lacan’s account, the truly ethical act possesses a self-disintegrative nature (1992). This rupture with self-interest, with the self normatively defined by a concern for life, safety, and shelter entails a break with the terms that define human interest in the social. The ethical act, Zupančič clarifies, “transforms its bearer (agent)...In the act, the subject is annihilated and

subsequently reborn (or not); the act involves a temporary eclipse of the subject” (2000, 83). In allowing a breaking away from normative self-interest, the ethical act enables a position undetermined by an interest in the socially possible. While this break with social accords is perilous, it affords the opportunity for the creation of entirely new ways of engaging in social-political relations.

The radical act of risking social selfhood frees the self from the limits of the symbolic. Yet, in doing so, it unsettles the self. This unsettling, rather than leaving the self in pieces, re-erects the self, as it creates a space of rebirth, a space where the possible no longer defines the limits of political action. The radical “No” of the ethical act breaks with symbolic limits only in breaking up the social identity of the self that enters into the act. As necessarily in defiance of what is, the act *appears* as a crime, as senseless, and as self-destructive. The act is “always a crime, a transgression—of the limits of the symbolic community to which I belong” (Zupančič 2000, 83). The riots, in their rejection of the terms of the symbolic, appeared just this way, as criminal transgressions, to almost all external witnesses. Yet, the rioters, in their seemingly unproductive destruction of their already marginal social survivability, have actually expressed a willingness to face the risks entailed in an act that has facilitated their ability to refigure the grounds of their social existence.

Lacanian psychoanalysis’s understanding of ethical action and Martin Luther King Jr.’s notion of “creative maladjustment” capture the significance of the West Baltimore uprising as a momentary instantiation of an ethics of refusal. Negation and dissent form the central ethical factor in both accounts. Yet, the creative element of the rioters’ actions cannot be adequately explained by a theory of pure dissent. While King alludes to “creativity,” his notion of “creative maladjustment” remains open for further development. Lacanian ethics edges closer to an

understanding of the productive outcomes of dissent by attending to the necessarily self-disruptive nature of ethical action. However, as the aftermath of the riots attests, neither King nor Lacanian ethics can satisfactorily account for the forceful *counternarrative* produced by the rioters. The riots did not just disrupt standard social narratives; they wrote new ones.

Rioters declined to merely choose from a selection of socially acceptable ways to grieve, express anger, and engage in political protest. Many refused the very terms of such a negotiation, and instead contributed to the creation of original modes of political action. Through the use of social media, through hashtags, Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook, Baltimoreans contradicted the media's depiction of the riots as self-destructive and violent, and turned to raise awareness about police violence against black Americans through these channels.

In blog-based interviews, several participants in the riots expressed views significantly contrary to mainstream media accounts. One man joked about the idea of looting toilet paper: "I saw my people out here gettin' toilet paper. Toilet Paper. Because they need toilet paper to wipe their ass, to wipe their kid's ass. You gon' send em to jail over toilet paper?" (Hazard 2015). He spoke of the context of the looting, its roots in socioeconomic deprivation, presenting a counter to the media's construal of the looting as opportunistic and unwarranted and the rioters as uneducated and naïve. As journalist Dominique Hazard points out, the notion that the riots were self-destructive seemed completely out of place as well. She recalls, "Folks straight up told me, 'we don't own anything here,' and it was crystal clear to me that the communities had already been destroyed by poverty, by exploitation, by structural racism long before any riots connected to the murder of Freddie Gray" (2015). In addition to the impressions given in these interviews during the uprising, numerous participants expressed similar views in a collection of tweets published following the riots.

The zine, *The 2015 Baltimore Uprising: A Teen Epistolary*, contains a compilation of tweets from Baltimore teenagers during the days following the revelation of Freddie Gray's death. The thoughts expressed in the anthology differ concerning the reasons for, and the implications of Gray's death and the ensuing uprising, but many emphasize the political importance and self-affirmative nature of the looting and rioting. Writing in opposition to the portrayal of the riots as "embarrassing" or counter productive for the black community, many affirmed the need for what they variously referred to as "the uprising," "the purge," or "the riot. One woman writes, "let them ppl protest how they please, fuck being embarrassing, it's about getting the point across #NoJusticeNoPeace," another "For 2 weeks we have held peaceful protest still no answers ! remember that." The news media's portrayal of the rioters' actions as frightening or unwarranted was countered by statements like "Being an African American in America is scary!" and "If you from Baltimore you know the city been a Volcano waiting to erupt for a while now." In response to accusations that the riot was ruining the city: "RUIN Baltimore??? Bitch have you SEEN the city?????" The collection of tweets also quite clearly counters mainstream news media's effacement of women, white people, and the elderly's participation in the uprising. In addition to offering a correction to the media's problematic coverage of the events and their significance, the compilation of tweets points to how teens used Twitter to share news, express political opinions, and check in on one another during the riots.

The role of social media in the rioters' creation of novel forms of political engagement extends to their advancement of the movement #blacklivesmatter. This political movement was created following the acquittal of the police officer responsible for the the shooting death of Trayvon Martin, an unarmed black teenager. The founders of #blacklivesmatter, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi, describe the movement as "an ideological and political

intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise. It is an affirmation of Black folks' contributions to this society, our humanity, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression" (*#BlackLivesMatter* 2015). While the movement began with the widespread use of the hashtag #blacklivesmatter on social media, it has expanded to include rallies, teach-ins, protests, actions, and Twitter chats to raise awareness and fight against anti-Black racism. The founders of #blacklivesmatter publicly expressed their support for the uprising in Baltimore, and the riots themselves brought the movement more public exposure and likely more supporters (Workneh 2015).

The protestor's political use of social media during and after the riots, attests to the creative possibilities that emerge in ethical acts of refusal. In this framing, one perceives how the rioters acted to reject rather than adapt to the bounds of the given, while instantiating a new form of political participation. Through the reframing of their actions and the dissemination of the reality of the conditions in West Baltimore, the rioters introduced a crack in the societal quietude around issues of structural racism. Americans have been forced to listen to the truth: that comfort for some has been won through the de jure and de facto incarceration and dispossession of others. While white Americans have been exposed to this truth and many have turned to consider their responsibility for the dispossession of black people, how they will respond in the long-term remains to be seen.



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<sup>i</sup> I use the Lacanian term "Other" to designate the world of language and culture, as well as that which the subject comes to see as other to itself. This can be other people, as well as feelings, actions, desires, and thoughts that may emit from the self, but feel alien to it. This use of the term "Other," slightly deviates from the typical Lacanian use of the term to designate the world of language.

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<sup>ii</sup> For Lacan, desire drives our existence. Desire manifests as lack introduced by language, which propels being in its incessant search for satisfaction. Formed in the gap between needs and the articulation of these needs, the demands one addresses to the other, desire emerges from the very otherness of language. Because language comes to the self as Other, the demands one makes always introduce a disjoint between what they intend and what they say. Desire lives in this disjoint, as a longing for a satisfaction consistent with what is inexpressible in language. In this sense, the living subject exists as a lacking being (Lacan 1992, 294).

<sup>iii</sup> Stephen Mitchell also finds this dynamic central to clinical psychoanalysis, stating, “the therapeutic action of psychoanalysis is the emergence of something new from something old” (59).  
Mitchell, Stephen A. *Influence and Autonomy in Psychoanalysis*. Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2014.

<sup>iv</sup> For more on Lacan’s explanation of the term see:

Lacan, Jacques, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. New York: Norton, 1981.

Lacan, Jacques, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*. New York: Norton, 2007.

<sup>v</sup> Much of Ta-Nehisi Coates’ work details the extent to which White Democracy was built on plunder, the enslavement, divestment, and incarceration of black people in America. He states, “If you want to understand the relationship between African Americans and the country they inhabit, you must understand that one of the central features of that relationship is plunder—the taking from black people in order to empower other people” (2015).  
Coates, Ta-Nehisi. “The Clock Didn’t Start with the Riots.” *The Atlantic*, April 2015.