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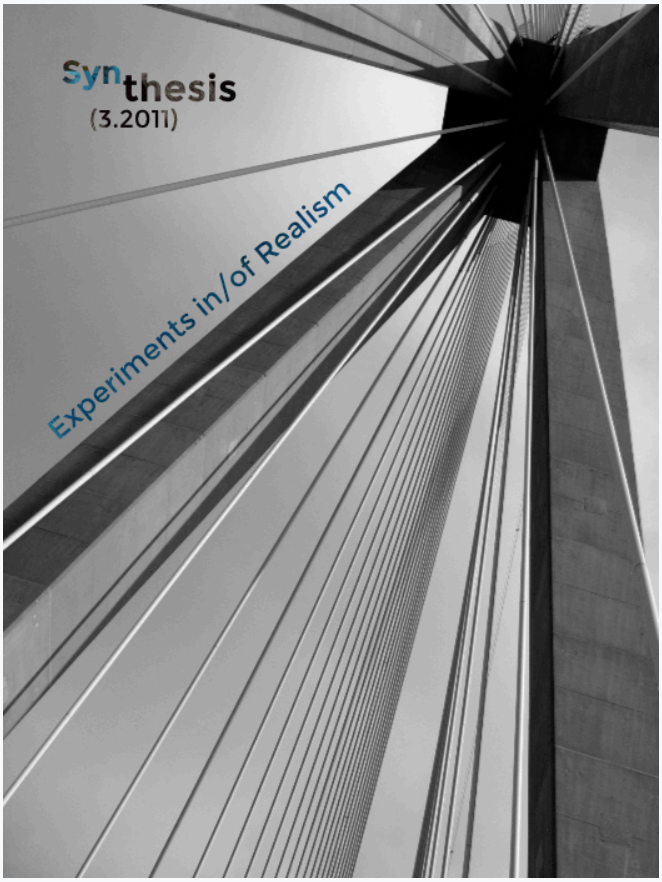


# Realism's Racial Gaze and Stephen Crane's The Monster: A Lacanian Reading

*Sheldon George*

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# Realism's Racial Gaze and Stephen Crane's *The Monster*: A Lacanian Reading

Sheldon George

**Abstract**
The article presents Stephen Crane's *The Monster* as a realist text that conveys the inability of American society in the 1890s to define itself through use of stereotyped knowledge of racial others. It reads the character Henry Johnson, a black man whose face is "burned away" in a house-fire, leaving behind only a single winking eye, as a literary embodiment of the all-seeing Lacanian gaze that, through the returned look of the racial other, confronts realist America with its own lack. Henry destabilises fantasies of an insular white identity through his performative mimicry of white dress and mannerism. He allows the text to present race as grounded only in performance and a discourse of white superiority. *The Monster* refutes this discourse, suggesting it is sanction for a brutal monstrosity at the heart of America, one that the returned gaze of the scrutinising racial other now witnesses through the spectacle of America's racist and imperialistic practices.

Stephen Crane's novella *The Monster* begins with a little boy's game of role playing. Pretending to be "engine number 36," little Jimmie Trescott speedily makes "the run between Syracuse and Rochester" (190). In his haste, Jimmie steps on a flower in his father's, Doctor Trescott's, garden. In so doing, Jimmie symbolically displays to Crane's reader the fatal, destructive consequences of performing an identity that is not one's own. Though Jimmie tries to stand the trampled flower "on its spine, resuscitated, the spine of it [is] hurt, and it…only hang[s] limply from his hand" (190). Jimmie, we are told, "could do no reparation" (190). His play acting and Dr. Trescott's punishment for its ruinous effects obliquely introduce us to the anxiety over identity performance that centres the text; turning to his son, Trescott warns, "you had better not play train any more" (191). This warning from Trescott is in keeping with the time-period's literary rejection of pretence; what we find in the late 1800s is a heightened focus upon social reality that, in the literary realm, marked a renunciation of the maudlin emotionality of sentimental texts and a mocking of conspicuous consumption. But as the ending to the first scene of a story primarily about a black protagonist named Henry Johnson who mimics white dress and mannerism, Trescott's warning also binds literary rejections of pretence to more immediate social anxieties over a growing awareness of the mutability of racial identity.

Crane's text charts in its Post-Reconstruction literary world a social displacement of dominant racial norms established in slavery. It presents a world in which racial identity is a social performance, enacted by both black and white characters, and a threat to any renderings of a national identity underpinned by notions of a discrete white self. Focused upon Johnson as a black man whose face is "simply…burned away" when he tries to save Jimmie in a house fire, the text contemplates the proper social position for a seemingly faceless mass of freed blacks in American society, a mass now legally cast in the role of American citizens (211). Crane's text establishes distinctive views for its narrator and its varied characters upon this issue of African-American integration into American society. While the narrator judges the potential of Henry and his race based upon their imbecilic mimicry of whites, Dr. Trescott himself comes to mimic Jimmie's attempt to resuscitate the injured flower by saving Henry's life and taking on his future care; seeking to make "reparation" to the now physically disfigured and mentally debilitated servant who rescued his son and preserved his home, Trescott resists those caustic fictions of whiteness that had already scalded generations of African Americans confined within the torrid *national* house that race helped to build (190). Through Trescott and its other characters, Crane's *The Monster* thus attempts to imagine the possibility of a new start for America, contemplating both the potential invalidation of a national identity based upon whiteness and the feasibility of coexistence with a population of African-Americans whose identity may now escape the stereotyped projections through which American society had come to know them.

Crane writes in the 1890's, situated within a group of literary artists often called realists or naturalists. Scholars like Amy Kaplan have shown that realism was not an artistic endeavour to realistically reproduce reality, but a "strategy for imaging and managing the threat of social change" (10). In a

rapidly shifting social environment that feels the impact of a recent civil war, a Reconstruction that did not properly address issues of social equality, radical technological progress, and an influx of racial and ethnic others made manifest through the presence of a now free black population and a flood of immigrants from Europe and Asia, realism emerges as "part of a broader cultural effort to fix and control a coherent representation of a social reality that seems increasingly inaccessible, fragmented, and beyond control" (8). In its specific relation to racial others, realism is a means of making the other knowable, of delineating and codifying knowledge about the stranger in one's presence. Crane's own obsession with observing and recording the lives of New York slum-dwellers is well documented in his literature. Of all his texts, however, Crane's *The Monster* seems perhaps most revealing of the realist sentiment and agenda; as Kaplan explains, "underlying many realist novels" is both a "fear" that the social sphere has transformed into "something monstrous and threatening" and a challenge embraced by "the novelist" not of "reflecting but of capturing, wrestling, and controlling a process of change which seems to defy representation" (10). What we find in *The Monster* is a Stephen Crane who not only actively displays, but is also overwhelmed by, the apparent impossibility of truly knowing and representing the racial others who are redefining the American scene.

Crane's literature presents a view of American society, and indeed of reality itself, that is both an extension and a refutation of the realist effort to make the unknowable other known. *The Monster*'s relation to race and realism can be read within the larger context of a propensity within Crane's works to frustrate what Michael Bell calls "the need for authority and certainty" (147). As Bell notes, Crane's texts operate through a literary style that refuses "to authorize any single language or set of images" as true to reality (146), a "style that deliberately calls attention to itself as a style" (132). We recognise this focus upon literary style when, for example, during Jimmie's accident with the flower, the text describes the doctor as busy "shaving [his] lawn as if it were a priest's chin" (190). Such use of incongruous imagery stresses a focus upon literary style that seems at odds with the realist insistence upon what the movement's pioneer, William Dean Howells, identifies as the need for the artist not to "take the life-likeness out" of his texts so as to "put the book-likeness into them" (*Criticism* 12). But, as Bell suggests, Crane's disruptive and intrusive style of writing advances a "profound skepticism of outworn styles of expression" and ways of thinking (139), a skepticism that is in keeping with the realist fears expressed by Howells that artistic imitation of the works of "masters" (12) will lead to a lack of "fidelity" in the artist's "expression of life" (11).

Crane's own fidelity, as Bell shows, is to the "fashioning of an authentic *style*, an authentic [literary] *language*" (134). Yet, Crane's language often seems inauthentic, frequently emerging from a mocking narrator who, for example, presents the actions of the battling urchins in *Maggie* within the ill-fitted language of a Homeric epic, or who provides a blatantly racist critique in *The Monster* of the African-American denizens of Watermelon Alley. What is authentic about this language, however, is its near-precise articulation of the mindsets of Crane's characters. As Bell explains, though the urchins have no knowledge of Homer, they truly "conceive of their struggle" in such epic terms (138). Their illusions of grandeur highlight a focus in Crane upon the "self-delusions of [his] characters" that is equally expressed in the narrator's imitations of Homeric language (138). Through a focus upon imitation of linguistic style, Crane's works convey that when we grant "authority to the styles in which others' perceptions have been expressed" imitation "constitute[s], in effect, the only experience [or access to reality] there is" for us (139). If, as Kaplan shows, realism does not reflect, but seeks instead to produce anxiety-assuaging knowledge of, reality and racial others, Crane's work is sympathetic to the need for this knowledge and its stabilising social effects (11); but, as Bell argues, Crane remains more critical than realists like Howells (139) of a reliance in this produced knowledge upon abstract assertions and imitations that are not established "by the authority of personal experience" (141). Thus, in *The Monster*, it is through the narrator's and other characters' imitations, and most especially through their use of what we may call after Bell "tawdry recyclings" of racist language and thinking, that Crane displays his own realist aversion for established styles. Encased within an effort to, as Bell says, display the "dreadful power of established styles to determine consciousness," Crane depicts

racist thinking as a form of social imitation anxiously employed in the impossible task of defining the other (139).

Crane's focus upon imitation allows for his unveiling and critiquing of realist efforts to produce the racist knowledge and transgressive pleasures that underpin white American identity. My own reading of Crane's relation to realism's efforts to represent the unknowable is grounded in Lacanian psychoanalysis. Through the aid of Lacanian theorists Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks and Homi Bhabha, I will argue that defining the racial other becomes imbricated during the realist period with an effort to access the pleasure, or what Jacques Lacan calls the *jouissance*, of the Real. I read Crane's text as displaying an attempt in both its textual world and American society at large to retain a *jouissance* of the Real that is bound to slavery and race. I suggest that the text recognises that slavery as an institution provided white Americans with access to an illicit pleasure which would become blocked during the realist moment. In making such an assertion about the relation of American society to *jouissance*, I am beginning from the familiar psychoanalytic reading of the oedipal narrative as a reflection of what Freud calls the moral law or the incest taboo. This law, as a prohibition against incest, limits the subject's contact with *jouissance*. Where the subject's desire to sleep with the mother and kill the father is read in Lacanian terms as a desire to return to the bliss of the Real, to a lost past of pleasurable oneness with the mother that only ever existed within and continually shapes the fantasies that ground the subject's psyche, slavery allowed white slave-holding American society a transgressive encounter with *jouissance*. As Seshadri-Crooks asserts, "in the racial realm [of slavery], the taboo against incest plays no role" (42); Seshadri-Crooks elaborates that incest was "possible" in slavery because the racial symbolic "present[ed] a selected view of the family," making it so that "the master could cohabit with [both] his slaves" and "the children he bred upon his slaves" (42). This transgression against the incest taboo, I would argue, is only one synecdochical example of the ways that slavery counteracted the normal interdictions that restricted the white subject's access to pleasure.

Scholars like William Brown have noted the striking role that race and pleasure play within both Crane's *The Monster* and the American society of the time period. Brown traces in realist American society an "amusement/knowledge system" (208) grounded upon a "textual transformation of…foreigners into freaks" (202). Noting the period's abiding interest in minstrel shows and its fascination with both dime museums and circuses like Barnum and Bailey's—which displayed both freaks and "'actual' black savage[s]" (216)—, Brown describes what he calls the "spectatorial apparatus" that "produces 'knowledge' in convergence with, and *as* the convergence of, pleasure and horror" (210). My own contention is that this accessing of pleasure through knowledge, which for Brown is so fully conjoined with horror in the realist period, is marked by a qualitative shift away from the pleasure associated with slavery, which had entailed a more direct access to and control over the racial other's body.

Brown approaches a similar view, arguing that Crane's text figures "a particular shift in American visibility that we can begin to sense by remarking how photography…had come to be associated with fiends, freaks, and monsters" (236). Partially aided by Lacanian psychoanalysis, Brown contends that *The Monster* "materializes the Lacanian gaze" (236), which is "not the look" of the subject finding pleasure in his observation of freaks and savages, but the horrifying sense that the "subject 'is looked at from all sides'" (235). Brown links this new fear of visibility to the development of "the hand camera" (237), which had the "disarming effect of arming the public with sight" (236) that threatened to violate "private space" and transform everyday Americans into objects of surreptitious observation (237). For Brown, "*The Monster* condenses two histories of American theatricality—the history of the minstrel and the history of the freak—to allegorise the process of photographic development as facial disfigurement" while also displaying "unprecedented anxieties about the condition of being visible" (236). By tying realism more directly to race and pleasure, however, what I would like to develop more fully in this paper is Brown's sense that "literary monsters" can be "understood to demonstrate an

externalization of the [Lacanian] gaze" (235), and his reading of the text as exposing "a moment in the history of vision when such a psychoanalytic point could become culturally intelligible" (236).

## The Gaze and *Jouissance*

Crane's text marks this historical shift from the pleasure of seeing to the horror of being seen by charting in its literary world the desire for an unchanged post-war American landscape. This desire is expressed through the relation of its characters to Henry Johnson. When Henry is burned in the fire and carried away on a stretcher, little boys chant a couplet: "Nigger, nigger, never die, / Black face and shiny eye" (211). These chants seek to pin Henry as eternal, black-faced other. But, ironically, the fire that burns away Henry's face and turns him into a monster also liberates him from external, white categories of identification. Deemed to be horrific beyond words, Henry is described as "simply a dreadful thing" (228). What Henry becomes is the Lacanian Thing, where Jacques Lacan defines the Thing as an unmasked emergence of the Real (*Ethics* 71). Lacan asserts that man has eyes so that he "might not see" this Real, so that he might not see the lack or nothingness that structures his being and consciousness (*Fundamental* 109). Lacan draws a strict distinction between seeing, as a constituent of reality, and what he calls the gaze, as an unveiling of the Real. The act of seeing, Lacan shows, involves a process of constructing one's own "representations" of reality, so that vision itself elides the gaze and masks the Real (81). But "if beyond appearance there is nothing," Lacan says, then "there is gaze" (103). The gaze is the subject's sense that "in [her/his] existence" s/he is "looked at" by the Real (72). It is "not a seen gaze, but a gaze imagined by [the subject to be located] in the field of the other" (84), a gaze that "surprises" the subject in her/his voyeuristic process of seeing the reality he attempts desperately to construct as a screen over this Real (84). Crane's text displays, I argue, a struggle to see a reality that is grounded in the nullity of whiteness and threatened by the Real Henry's gaze makes manifest.

To understand the function of this gaze, it is important to note its prevalence in Crane's writing. What remains consistent in Crane's work is an obsession with the returned look of the other who sees the subject seeing this other. It appears perhaps most pronouncedly in Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the City*, where we find the example of two children crouched in a corner staring fearfully at the face of their sleeping, inebriated mother: paralysed with immobility, they are convinced that "she need only to awake," only to open her eyes, "and all the fiends would come from below" (13). This emergence from below is tied in *Maggie* to the mother's ability to exercise a spectral tyranny of control over her children that saps them of any joy and binds them to the infernal reality of a life of suffering and abuse in the slums. It is this same spectral tyranny that explains Henry's transformation into monstrosity when he loses his face. Henry's transformation reflects the sense of social chaos that emerges in the period as new groups of people, refusing merely to be looked at or externally defined, stake a claim in the cultural process of defining American identity. During the late 1800s, with African-Americans in particular, we note the intensity of this claim especially in the political arena. As Michael Topp has recorded, by the end of Reconstruction in 1877 African Americans had held "six hundred legislative seats," and "fourteen blacks [had] served as U.S. congressional representatives," with two African Americans being "elected as U.S. Senators" and six others serving "as lieutenant governors" (83). Where Reconstruction itself was seen by many southerners as a tyrannical imposition, the termination of Reconstruction complimented efforts to reverse these advances made by African Americans and reassert the power to see and define one's own world and its occupants.

Given this context, Crane's story can be said to literalise the phenomenon of the still socially unrecognised black man who, during the late 1800s, insists on making himself present, on being seen and heard by a community that is repulsed by his physical presence. Henry Johnson is the image of a black man simply out of place in the white community that refuses to see him truly. Abhorrently faceless, Henry stalks the neighbourhood after his accident, seeking always to mimic white civility. Speaking in an inhuman voice and sounding a laugh that is "like the rattle of pebbles" (215), Henry,

through his nauseating presence, scares people so that they cannot eat; his casual peering into the window of a little girl's party leaves her "shuddering and weeping" (228); and his stay in Trescott's home leads to the family's alienation from the rest of the community. Henry is thus a menace to all functioning of the communal and domestic spheres. He is a black, faceless other meant neither to be heard nor seen.

But the otherness of Henry's presence does not lie in Henry himself. If Henry is, as the weeping girl asserts, "a dreadful thing" (228), what is most Thing-like about Henry is precisely his emergence as gaze. Significantly, after the fire, all that remains of Henry's face is the shiny eyes that peer back "unwinking" at the text's white characters, horrifying them and stopping them in their tracks (212). Lacan identifies in the gaze an "anti-life, anti-movement function" (*Fundamental* 118). It is under "the magic of [Henry's] unwinking eye," as gaze, that all conversation stops and language falters in the text (212). The power of this gaze becomes evident precisely at the level of discourse, as Henry's "unwinking eye" brings to a halt Judge Hagenthorpe's ability to express to Trescott his belief that "the poor fellow ought to die" (213). Preventing Henry's death, this gaze, in its anti-life function, highlights an identifiable threat to what we may call the discursive fantasies that help sustain the psychic life of white Americans in the post-slavery era of realism.

To understand this threat, aimed at both discourse and psychic life, we must more fully articulate a Lacanian explanation of the relations among the Real, reality, and language. As Lacan argues, "every reality is founded and defined by a discourse" of language (*Encore* 32); but both discourse and the act of writing are aimed fundamentally at what escapes symbolisation and can only exist in the Real: Language, in its basic metonymic function, attempts to compensate for the constitutive lack of subjectivity, for the sexual relation that, Lacan famously announces, cannot be written. Lacan asserts, "everything that is written stems from the fact that it will forever be impossible to write, as such, [this] sexual relationship," which escapes symbolisation because it is in the Real (35). Realism, I would say, is a linguistic discourse that both attempts and fails to write this relation, continually falling short of producing that *jouissance* which is made inaccessible by the incommensurability of this relation with Symbolic representation.

My reading of realism therefore ties realist writing to the elemental effort by language to recapture for the subject a sense of *jouissance*, or bliss, that the subject associates with that part of the self that, in Lacan's words, the "sexed being loses in sexuality" (*Fundamental* 197). What every subject loses in sexuality is some portion of the libido, as "pure life instinct…irrepressible life" (198), the libido as what Freud calls polymorphous perverse, able indiscriminately to attain pleasure from all sources. Lacan shows that in the course of the sexed being's development, pleasure becomes localised around the erogenous zones, into which the libido "inserts itself" (200). The subject experiences pleasure primarily through "one of the orifices of the body," and thus transforms such objects as the mother's breast (because of its contact with the child's mouth as orifice) into his/her first form of the *objet a*, the fantasy object that promises the subject an impossible return to a state of bliss and completion. "All the forms of the *objet a* that can be enumerated are the representatives" of the lost libido, asserts Lacan, but they come to be associated with what is found in the Symbolic, with the subject's mate, for example, whom the subject envisions to be a lost half of the self, the lover that will complete him/her (198). Lacan affirms that the "sexual relation" is in this way "handed over to the hazards of the field of the Other" (199); it is handed over, he explains, to the Symbolic and the discourse of "the old woman," the teachings of those adults through whom, in the Symbolic, one "learn[s] what one must do to make love" (199). Thus discourse itself becomes implicated in the subject's effort to regain her/his lost bliss and write the sexual relation. Lacan states, Symbolic "reality is approached with apparatuses of jouissance," and "there's no other apparatus than language" (*Encore* 55).

Crane's focus upon the power of imitated language and styles to determine consciousness acknowledges the central role that discourse plays in the mediation of reality. But what Lacanian

theory enables us to envision is a reading of realism as a specific moment in American history when the presence of racial others forestalls efforts by white writers to employ literature as an apparatus for writing the sexual relation and constituting a Symbolic reality that allows for access to some semblance of *jouissance*. Here we encounter a breakdown of the normal Symbolic function of race that is so skillfully laid bare by Seshadri-Crooks in her book *Desiring Whiteness*. Seshadri-Crooks shows that in the Symbolic it is "race [that] articulates itself with sex to gain access to desire or lack," access to the lost libido stricken from the subject (3). Where sex, or the libido, escapes the Symbolic and, in Lacan's words, "doesn't stop not being written" in all of our discourses (*Encore* 94), Seshadri-Crooks shows that race attempts to "signify the very thing that is lacking" (43). Race puts itself in the "very place of being" (43), or *jouissance*, presenting "Whiteness" as what Seshadri-Crooks calls "the master signifier (without a signified) that establishes [not only] a structure of relations" and a "pattern for organizing human difference" (4), but also a system that "attempts to signify the impossible, a core notion of humanness, or being itself—the subject beyond symbolic determinacy" (54). Whiteness thus functions as the signifier that establishes a fantasy of access to being and *jouissance* through the hierarchal structure of a racial supremacy.

Seshadri-Crooks maintains that given its ability "to fill that place [of lack within the subject] with the signifier…the racial symbolic is a success story" (44). The validity of Seshadri-Crooks' statement is borne out by the perpetuation of race into our own time period, but what we most often find in the realist moment of American history is the defeat of desperate efforts to shore up those written narratives through which white authors utilise race to access a semblance of being. Crane's work is emblematic of a growing realist realisation of the frustrating impossibility of fully binding the other to externally imposed meanings. We see this recognition of the limits of imposed definitions approached variously in many of the important works of American realism: It emerges, for example, in Mark Twain's depiction of Huck Finn's growing respect for Jim; in the recognition by Howells' title character Silas Lapham that "the astonishing thing" is "not what a face tells, but what it don't tell" (*Rise* 79); in the impression of Henry James's southern protagonist in *The Bostonians*, Basil Ransom, that the age "is womanized" by an inability to "look the world in the face and take it for what it is" (260); and in the desire of Christie, from Louisa May Alcott's *Work,* to form a "loving league of sisters, old and young, black and white," who can "hasten the coming" of a new age (343). Realism, I thus maintain, displays the failure of whiteness as the master signifier of being and *jouissance*.

As Crane displays this failure, what we see most particularly in *The Monster* is a realism that depicts the circulation of this signifier beyond the 'racial white' bodies it is supposed to define. The danger that Henry Johnson presents to the social environment of Crane's text is precisely one of him taking on and embodying the signifiers of whiteness that are meant to situate him on the lower rungs of society through their production of the hierarchal exclusivity of racial meaning. Crane's *The Monster* avoids either realistically portraying Henry or fully tying him to stereotypical depictions. Instead, the text defines Henry through his performative mimicry of whiteness. Henry is initially presented to us as laughable because he parades himself as "the biggest dude in town" (196). When Henry imitates the role of a white gentleman-suitor, paying a visit to the beautiful Bella and her mother at their residence in Watermelon Alley, the narrator asserts: they "imitated until a late hour" and "exchanged the most tremendous civilities," but "if they had been the occupants of the most gorgeous salon in the world they could not have been more like three monkeys" (197). In spite of the narrator's mocking of blacks, however, there is a certain danger in Henry's imitative performance. Henry displays a process of mimicry that, as Homi Bhabha shows, is often articulated in a racial context around the axis of "resemblance and menace" (86).[1] Asserting, like Seshadri-Crooks, that desires for the promulgation of notions of race are bound to the subject's psychic need for a sense of totality, Bhabha views racial difference as a means of guaranteeing the white subject's uniqueness and wholeness; race enables the fantasy of what Bhabha calls the "undifferentiated whole white body," while it simultaneously casts inferiority and lack unto the racial other (92). What is challenged in mimicry, therefore, is the fantasy of an insular whiteness, a psychic totality that is supported by visible difference.

Mimicry transforms into menace by virtue of the fact that it is based upon a resemblance that may, as Bhabha says, "radically [revalue] the normative knowledges of race, writing, [and] history" (91). Mimicry offers another view of the other, and challenges all forms of authorised knowing of both self and other. As Henry saunters down the road in front of the gaping town's people, it becomes clear that it is "not altogether a matter of the lavender trousers, nor yet the straw hat with its bright silk band" that makes him notable (194). Though employed in Trescott's stable tending horses, Henry evidences a change that emerges casually with the donning of new clothing. The change, our narrator informs us, is "somewhere far in the interior of Henry" (194). There is "no cake-walk hyperbole in it" (194). He is "simply a quiet, well-bred gentleman of position" (194). What is depicted here is not precisely Henry's change into a white gentleman, but the textual representation of whiteness and identity itself as performance. As Bhabha shows, mimicry "hides no essence, no itself" within the performing subject (90). Thus Henry's chameleon-like changes give proof that popular notions of black identity are linked to what we may call after Bhabha a "white man's artifice inscribed on the black man's body" (45). Henry is dangerous, therefore, because he displays the potential for blacks to break free of their past identities and construct a new self in this post-slavery era.

Crane's text alerts us to this danger through the mobility inherent in Henry's occupation and through characters misreading both Henry's occupation and his identity. Employed as a hostler, Henry exceeds the duties of the stable, trekking into the open space of a town fascinated by his presence. Henry's "extraordinary arrival" (195) in the main street of the town is marked by such physical "effulgence" that it is as though "he had never washed a wagon in his life" (194). His "stroll" signals his dangerous social mobility as he crisscrosses both his final destination of Watermelon Alley, a segregated space assigned to blacks, and the open space of the town (195). His entrance into this open space leads to contention and confusion among the town's residents. The barber shop owner, Reifsnyder, "turbulently" asserts, "that man [is] a Pullman-car porter" (196). Reifsnyder's confusion highlights the instability of identity that so destabilises the textual world and historical moment Crane describes. Reinforcing a connection between trains, mobility, and performed identities that emerges from the very first pages of the text with little Jimmie's game, Reifsnyder associates Henry with that growing population of African Americans who in this period found employment on George Pullman's trains to be a route toward upward mobility. As Jack Santino relates, "the first [Pullman-car] porters were drawn from the ranks of slaves, and many porters were born to slave families after slavery itself had been abolished" (10); but "everything about Pullman porters is consistent" with an "image of urbanity and sophistication" (14). The porters were "the living symbol of the Pullman Company," which offered the public luxury trains that would mark a "golden age of rail travel in the United States" (8). To "whites, the porter represented service and luxury," and "to blacks, he represented status and mobility," a mobility that scholars like Santino and William H. Harris argue would later contribute "directly to the creation of a black middle class" in America (Santino 8).

This historical context sheds some light on the town's people's impression of Henry as a dandy in fancy clothing. Their conception aligns with a process described by Santino whereby, "probably because of their real dignity…porters were reduced to fops" in the minds of some Americans, making them no longer the "stylish, urbane black man who was threatening to whites because he was not a country bumpkin" (121). By viewing the town's people's response within this historical context, we gain a deeper understanding of the threatening, unstable nature of race in the realist world beyond the text. We can further elaborate this understanding through an initial return to the work of Seshadri-Crooks. Seshadri-Crooks shows that "race is entirely captured and produced by language" (44). This discursive root of race is what enables its performance in the manner I have been describing. Realism struggles to come to terms with a reality in which such characteristics purportedly inherent to whiteness as the refined mannerism of a gentleman can be mimicked by a black buffoon like Henry. What we approach here is a moment when white Americans start to experience their subjectivity as what Seshadri-Crooks terms "an effect of language" and discourse, confronting them with the "utter

groundlessness of the law of racial difference" (45). But as a "success story," Seshadri-Crooks asserts, race recoups itself: "its symbolic origin…does not render it simply historical" because it relies upon "the pre-discursive mark[s] on the surface of the body," such as skin color and hair texture, to reproduce racial difference on another level (46). What we find in both Crane and realism more generally, however, is the fallibility of these racial markers.

When he first sees Henry walk past his barber shop, Reifsnyder, whose name and accent mark his immigrant status, asserts to his customers, "I bait you any money that vas not Henry Johnson" (196). Reifsnyder's status as owner of an established business within the community, despite his apparent Germanic background, suggests that skin colour is the differential factor that determines acceptance into the white community. But his ability to identify with Henry's status, his questioning of "how it feels to be without any face," also implies his awareness of his own liminal position in the community (223). As one of his customers notes to him, "you're kicking because if losing faces became popular, you'd have to go out of business" (223). The customer's comment most directly references the fact that Reifsnyder makes his living grooming the heads and faces of others in the community, thus indicating the dependence of their identity upon his deferential presence; but more importantly, it also speaks to his proximity to the kind of social invisibility and voicelessness the text contemplates in relation to blacks. As the narrator divulges, because he had not been "taught silence by the hammering reiteration of a tradition," Reifsnyder "was very garrulous" (221). Reifsnyder's insistence upon speaking when he is not supposed to causes him to become an annoyance to his customers. They call him a "chump" and tell him to "shut up" (221). Through these customers' distance from Reifsnyder and through Reifsnyder's relation to Henry's facelessness, we see that skin colour is no assurance that one is welcomed in American realist society.

What we note in realism is the way that, far from being predictably established through skin color, otherness is continually defined and redefined[2] We see this clearly when we expand our purview of realism beyond Crane. Writing in the same time period as Crane and sharing Crane's interest in tenement life, Jacob Riis, for example, refutes the argument "that pauperism and drunkenness naturally grow in the tenements" of New York (25) by presenting in a *positive* light *both* the "order-loving German" (41) and his African American "fellow-citizens" (119). Often defining difference through recourse to either language or religious belief, Riis contrasts "the German, who begins learning English the day he lands as a matter of duty," to the Italian, who "learns slowly, if at all" (42), and to the "Joss worshippers," "John Chinaman," who has resisted "all attempts to make an effective Christian" of him "in this generation" (73). Since it is not primarily race that here excludes "John Chinaman," the Chinese stand on equal footing, not with blacks for Riis, but with the Jews of "Jewtown," New York, who have "crowded out the Gentiles" (82). Just as the Chinese's true god is "the 'Melican Joss,' the almighty dollar" (79), "money is [the Jew's] God" (83), and Jews remain where "the new day that dawned on Calvary left them standing, stubbornly refusing to see the light" (87). For Riis, it is the Jews, Italians, and Chinese who lack social mobility, while, like Germans, the African American has emerged as the new "colored citizen" who is, Riis contends, "a very different individual from the 'nigger'" of the past (114). "Cleanliness is the characteristic of the negro," says Riis (114); but unlike the laundry-worker "Chinaman," whose "cat-like" cleanliness is linked to "stealth and secretiveness" (75), the African American displays a cleanliness that shows him to be "immensely the superior of the lowest of the whites, the Italians and the Polish Jews, below whom he has been classed in the past" (114).

This inconsistency in realist assertions about where racial and ethnic groups are to be situated within the social sphere is reflective of an oscillation in the fantasies through which racial difference attempts to grant access to being and *jouissance* in the realist period. The work of Lacanian scholar Slavoj Zizek can lend some perspective to both this oscillation and Crane's text. Zizek's reading of racism allows us to see that this oscillation is not tied to the particular racial or ethnic group the realist struggles to position, but rather to that group's capacity to fulfill a fantasy function; he asserts, "one falls into the

ideological trap [of racism] precisely by succumbing to the illusion that anti-Semitism really *is* about Jews" (77). Since "the gap that separates reality from the Real" is the "screen of fantasy" (66), the subject only ever encounters the racial other as a source of *jouissance* "in so far as this other enters the subject's fantasy-frame" (64). If realism is marked by this intense confusion over identity, we can say in Zizek's words that, "in this violent upheaval," what "caused the shift was merely *the change in the other's position with regard to [the subject's] phantasmic frame*" (65). In a time period when Jews, Italians, Irish, and other groups look 'white' in skin color but retain cultural, religious, linguistic, and national identities that make them less appealing than—or even the social inferiors of—African Americans, whiteness as the organising signifier of difference becomes unreliable; indeed, the fantasy frame established by whiteness, by that superlative which promises a plenitude of being and *jouissance*, becomes threatened with its own partial or temporary disintegration. "When the phantasmic frame disintegrates," Zizek says, "the subject undergoes a 'loss of reality' and starts to perceive reality as an 'irreal' nightmarish universe" (66). This "irreal" reality is precisely what realism charts.

## Fictions of Race and the Fragmented Self

In realism, there is a growing awareness of race as, not a biological fact of reality, but what Mark Twain calls in *Pudd'nhead Wilson* a "fiction of law and custom" (9). The reversal we see in the social positions held by blacks in Crane's and Riis's texts is determined precisely by these authors' differing relation to the dual components of this fiction: the law and custom. Riis can embrace African Americans because the law has defined them as citizens. Despite the American custom of racism, their social position is legally established for Riis, and their historical past becomes what makes them knowable as, in Riis' words, "easily moulded," "loyal to the backbone," and "proud of being an American" (118). What we find in Crane, however, is a sense that the lingering customs of racism continue to surface in American society as direct violations of the laws of the nation.

Most particularly, Crane's *The Monster* presents a veiled critique of the continued outlaw practice in American society of lynching black men. The text presents this practice as dangerous to the nation and its founding principles. While describing Henry's attempt to rescue Jimmie from the fire, the text informs us that the flame that "block[s Henry's] path and [threatens to doom] him and Jimmie" (205) is an "outbreak [that] had been well planned, as if by professional revolutionist" (202). In an apparent reference to the Ku Klux Klan, the text relates that "no one could hear this low droning of the gathering clans," but the rising conflagration finds "the cord that support[s] 'Signing the Declaration [of Independence],'" causing it to drop "to the floor, where it burst with the sound of a bomb" (202). Rejecting the notion of black inferiority inherent in Klan-like thinking, and embracing that notion of identity as performed which so unsettles both the text's characters and its narrator, the scene depicts a fire that consumes and turns to ashes not just principles that define American and white identity, but also stereotypes that define a black otherness. In this decisive moment, when white men respond to the fire with a "temporary insanity," Henry acts heroically and impulsively to save Jimmie (203). Henry's act breaks him free of the racial identity roles he is supposed to perform for the spectators whom he fascinates. Significantly, when Henry does find himself temporarily submitting to the flames, it is only "because of his fathers," because of his conscious association with a historical past and the discourse that surrounds it, a stereotypical discourse about racial identity that urges him to "[bend] his mind in a most perfect slavery to the conflagration" (204).

Crane's text challenges this discourse. As Elaine Marshall argues, it is quite likely that *The Monster* is Crane's response to "his brother William's eye-witness account of the lynching of Robert Lewis" (206). The lynching took place in Crane's hometown of Port Jarvis, New Jersey, and Crane speaks of his text as an effort to "scold away" at the town's populace for allowing such an atrocity (205). It is the lingering presence of these racial atrocities, which here spread across space and time into the north,

that would lead Mark Twain to describe America as "The United States of Lyncherdom" (*Great Works* 479). Both Twain and Crane are unsettled by the sense that America has, as Twain puts it, "fallen" (479). Consequently, what we see in Crane's focus on Henry is not an investigation of black racial identity, but an analysis of the white psyche that constructs the figure of the racialised black man. If *The Monster* is focused upon the Lacanian gaze, we must recall that confronting this gaze means confronting one's own lack mirrored through the eyes of the other. This mirroring is what is conveyed in the text's assertion that Henry's face "showed like a reflector" (197). Henry reflects back an image "alienated" from the white self, a "dark reflection" cast onto Henry as other (Bhabha 44). What is manifested in Henry is not a radical split between "self and [racial] other," but instead what Bhabha terms "the otherness of the self," the brutal inner core of the white self that has been displaced unto the racial other (44).

What was at stake in realism was primarily a definition of whiteness itself, and Crane is appalled by the brutality he identifies with this identity. Crane presents his textual world as one dominated by a spectacle of horror that is the very support of his characters' white, American identity. We see this clearly in the aftermath of the fire, as "each man in the stretcher party" carrying the charred body of Henry Johnson receives from it "a reflected majesty" (210). But it is Martha Goodwin—the one person willing to "defy the universe" (233) and "go against the whole town" in its condemnation of Henry Johnson (242)—who best exemplifies in the world of the text how this majesty grows out of a conjoined brutality and blind apathy toward others. Martha's majesty is displayed in the strength of her personality, her willingness to "try not to be afraid" of Henry (243) and not to join the "crowd around the jail" that forms what looks like a lynch mob after Henry starts a riot by scaring "an Irish girl" on the streets (233). Through this strength, however, Martha holds a "mental tyranny" over others (242), ensuring that when a "situation was without definitions," Martha "made definitions" (232). Significantly, Martha's definitions are all tied to revenge. Having suffered the early death of "her betrothed" (231), Martha conflates her readings and definitions of "the situation in Armenia, the condition of women in China, …the duty of the United States towards the Cuban insurgents, and many other colossal matters" with the "face of a man" she has lost because of a disease he "had not caught from her" (231). Wounded by this betrayal, Martha is "simply the mausoleum of a dead passion," which makes of her "the most savage critic in town" (233). Majestic and vengeful, Martha is a "woman of peace" who argues "constantly for a creed of illimitable ferocity" (232): in "the plan she had made for the reform of the world," she "advocated drastic measures," asserting such contentions as "all the Turks should be pushed into the sea" (232).

Martha embodies the horrific process by which Americans express their own psychological turmoil through a violence upon others that is masked as empathy. Having lost access to all but the gossamer image of the "face of [the] man" whose presence grounded both her domestic and her psychic fantasies of completion (231), Martha is plagued by what we may call after Lacan an aggressivity expressed through obsession with violence and images of "the fragmented body" (*Ecrits* 11). Aggressivity, Lacan tells us, arises from the breakdown of the subject's totalising fantasies and involves feelings of frustration that are exhibited through thoughts and actions that "den[y] respect for the natural forms of the human body" (11). Thus we may view both Martha's ferocity and the radical spread after slavery of such violent practices as lynching[3] as expressions of aggressivity, as acts of what Lacan terms "narcissistic tyranny" (27) aimed at the "[derealisation] of [racial] others" who challenge one's totalising views of the self and its world (28). Incapable of escaping her own narcissism, Martha, in the end, is driven only by her own pain and her trivial desire to gossip about the mishaps in her neighbours' lives: abandoning her efforts to speak up in Henry's defence, Martha joins her friends in taking up the new obsession of finding out exactly where the "Hannigans [who have been scared off by Henry] are going to move to" (243).

Martha's passions are unveiled by the text in a manner that is telling of a larger realist fear. Not only do we find in realism a sense of dread at seeing what lies at the heart of Americans, but we also recognise a very prominent apprehension that the tarnished soul of Americans is laid bare especially for racial others to observe. This apprehension is perhaps most noticeable in Twain. Responding to the imperialistic exploits of the United States that so fascinate Martha, Twain argues in his essay "To the Person Sitting in Darkness" that "we have debauched America's honour and blackened her face before the world" (*Great Works* 215). Twain remarks that imperialistic America has "been so eager to get every stake that appear[s] on the green cloth, that the People who Sit in Darkness have noticed it—they have noticed it, and have begun to show alarm" (206). Not only have they "become suspicious of the Blessings of Civilization," but "more—they have begun to examine them" (206). Twain's sense is precisely that the other sitting in darkness now returns the gaze of and has become the gaze for Americans caught up in the *jouissance* of their own brutality.

This gaze fundamentally disrupts the discourses that underwrite whiteness and justify its racial and social dominance in realist America. As Price McMurray shows, if the central dilemma that confronts Dr. Trescott after Henry's accident is a question of whether or not it is morally responsible of Trescott to allow Henry to live, this is because *The Monster* unmasks and critiques a social Darwinism that was foundational to a contemporaneous "system of belief in which black regression and eventual extinction were givens" (55). Trescott weighs the fact of Henry saving his son's life against racist claims that "any attempt to resist the Darwinian certainty of black extinction [is] unintentional cruelty" (54). I contend that this newly popular form of Darwinian racism should be seen in the context of Lacan's assertion that Darwin's theories "sanctioned" for "Victorian society" the "social devastation that it initiated on a planetary scale," providing this society justification for its brutality through the "*laissez-faire* of the strongest predators in competition for their natural prey" (*Écrits* 26). What happens in such a society in which the strong freely dominate the weak is that the empowered subject's relation to the "particular spatial field" of his/her fragmented psyche and body becomes "mapped socially" in such a way that both the subject's fantasies and his/her aggressivity are freely articulated onto the serviceable body of the other (27).

This kind of society attempts to establish itself in realist America as a continuation of those traditions and customs of slavery that allowed access to *jouissance* through the immanent availability of the slave. But if the subject of race seeks ultimately to ground his/her *jouissance* in a totalising racial fantasy of being, it is only the other's precarious positioning within this subject's fantasy frame that can quiet the subject's nightmares of fragmentation and fashion his/her dreams of a self devoid of lack. This subjective reliance upon the other is the central truth that Lacan articulates in his famous theory of the mirror stage, where the child can prop his/her fantasy of coherence only upon the presence of the reflected mother in the mirror: Subjectivity demands such external supports. In this period when blacks and growing numbers of immigrant populations begin to assert their own visibility and vocalise their own self definitions, realism confronts a social fragmentation that hinders the organisation of an American identity around ready-made supportive fantasies and discourses of the hierarchal relations between the self and the racial other. Where once, as masters of their social sphere, white Americans were able to throw "back unto the world the disorder of which [their] being is composed," now significantly deprived of control over the psychic projections and sustaining fantasies that make both the self and the other knowable, realist America moves toward a confrontation with the horrific monstrosity of its own lack (Lacan, *Écrits* 20). Stephen Crane's *The Monster*, through its punctiform reduction of the alienated self into a rendering of the faceless racial-other's returned gaze, draws our sights to a portentous adumbration of this lack. In the process, what Crane allows us to glimpse is not the incinerated visage of a black man, but the terrifying vacuity of the desolate whiteness that seems to be slowly unmasking itself at the heart of realist American society.

**Notes**

[1] Though Bhabha's work emerges from Lacan's writings on the gaze and mimicry, I turn here to Bhabha instead of Lacan because Bhabha's theory involves a more direct investigation of the social implications of psychic activity. While Lacan, for example, ties the gaze to the evil eye and an "envy that makes the subject pale before the image of a completeness [in the other] closed upon itself," Lacan does not provide analyses of the relation of such need for completeness to social phenomenon like racism (*Fundamental* 116).

[2] Indeed, as David Roediger notes, though the "first Congress convened under [the] Constitution voted in 1790 to require that a person be 'white' in order to be a naturalized citizen of the U.S.," the "hopeless imprecision of the term [white] left courts with impossible problems of interpretation that stretched into the twentieth century" (181).

[3] Mae M. Ngai relates that in the 1890s, when Crane writes *The Monster*, "at least two to three black southerners were hanged, burned at the stake, or otherwise murdered each week" (103).

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