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# The Fresh Prince of Wakanda – a Žižekian Analysis of Black America and Identity Politics

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## Abstract:

This paper introduces a new hypothesis for the rise of the politically correct left via an analysis of Black America. Drawing on Žižekian and psychoanalytical theory, it explores the ideological role of 'symptom' within America's cultural landscape - of that which states that society 'doesn't work' - by way of examining prominent African American figures and how they relate to this 'symptom': Will Smith and the 'hystericization of the symptom'; Barack Obama and the 'identification with the symptom'; the PC left and the 'implementation of the symptom as law'; the far right and the 'fear of loss of the symptom'; Kanye West, Candace Owens and the 'rejection of clinging to the symptom'. Additionally, the 90s sit-com *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* and the film *Black Panther (2018)* are analyzed and juxtaposed in order to further illustrate the process by which the recent ideological shift in our cultural and political discourse towards political correctness and identity politics has occurred.

## Part 1: Will Smith

There is something odd about Will Smith's decline in popularity. How did one of Hollywood's biggest stars, an actor once nicknamed 'Mr. July' for his incredible streak of summer blockbusters, lose his box office appeal? These are Smith's latest films: *Bright* (2017), *Collateral Beauty* (2016), *Suicide Squad* (2016), *Focus* (2015), *Winter's Tale* (2014), and *After Earth* (2013). All more or less flopped or were panned by critics. (Fletcher 2017: unpaginated) Some attribute Smith's decline in popularity to the decline of the movie star in general. Among other things, social media and streaming platforms like Netflix have changed the way we consume films. Although this is true, in the case of Will Smith, this explanation misses the crucial point: the shift in the cultural significance of Smith himself.

To understand this, let us recall the theme from Smith's breakout role, the iconic sitcom *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* (Borowitz and Borowitz 1990-1996): a young African American teenager from 'Philly' is sent to live with his rich African American family in Bel-Air after getting in trouble with kids 'from the hood'. The black Banks family lives in Bel-Air, one of the richest neighborhoods in America, where they employ a butler, sometimes 'act white', and essentially live out the American Dream. In a Žižekian sense, the entirety of the Banks family can be conceived as a fantasy masking the Real of social and racial Antagonism in the United States.

The character played by Will Smith, on the other hand, is something else entirely. Smith plays a fictionalized version of himself who goes by his own name, a rapper who plays basketball, wears flashy clothes, and constantly gets in trouble with authority, i.e. displays all the typical characteristics of a 'troubled black man from the ghetto', the figure that - more than any other in American culture - has come to symbolize the racial and economic divide in American society. This is where the sitcom draws its depth from: by inserting the very symbol of American conflict into a black version of the American Dream. This juxtaposition allowed the creators of the *Fresh*

*Prince of Bel-Air* to explore questions of black identity and racism in a compelling matter. According to Žižek, the question at the bottom of racism can be concisely expressed by the phrase '*che vuoi?*' What does the other want from me? In the *Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989) Žižek states:

We come across this '*che vuoi?*' everywhere in the political domain, including the 1988 American election struggle in which, after Jesse Jackson's first successes, the press started to ask 'What does Jackson really want?' Overtones of racism were easy to detect in this question, because it was never raised about other candidates. The conclusion that we are here dealing with racism is further confirmed by the fact that this '*Che vuoi?*' erupts most violently in the purest, so to say distilled, form of racism, in anti-Semitism: in the anti-Semitic perspective, the Jew is precisely a person about whom it is never clear 'what he really wants' - that is, his actions are always suspected of being guided by some hidden motives (the Jewish conspiracy, world domination and the moral corruption of Gentiles, and so on). (Žižek 1989: 127-128)

One of the strengths of narrative fiction becomes evident in this light: more than any other medium, it is apt to answer the question '*che vuoi?*' What does the hero want? And what obstacles does he have to overcome to get there? So what does the 'Fresh Prince' want? There are two main conflicts in the sitcom. The minor one is between Will and his cousin Carlton. Throughout the show, Will makes fun of Carlton for acting too white. Whiteness in this context can be understood as a willingness to act in accordance with the dominant 'white' social order. Beyond this, what we see are two black teenagers vying for social status while trying to find the correct way to live in a supposedly 'white world'.

The main conflict is between Will and Uncle Phil, the father figure in the sitcom. Uncle Phil not only represents the dominant social order, he also embodies the law: he is a professional judge. Will gets in trouble with Uncle Phil throughout the sitcom while clowning around and provoking him. Sometimes, Will makes valid points criticizing the dominant social order, as teenagers sometimes do. This is all well and good, you may say, but still, the question remains: '*che vuoi?*' What does the 'Fresh Prince' want? Attention? Status? Drugs? Sex? Violence?

Arguably the most celebrated and memorable episode of the entire sitcom is *Papa's Got a Brand New Excuse* (Jensen 1994), where the topic of the

absent African American father is addressed. In this episode, Will's biological father, whom he hasn't seen in years, suddenly returns. Will is exuberant and longs to connect with his dad. But he is disappointed in the end. When his father walks out on him once again, the camera pans to Uncle Phil. Will goes on a rant, breaks down in tears, and finally asks: "How come he don't want me, man?" (Oderinde 2014: video) According to urban legend, this wasn't in the script. Will Smith was overcome by emotion and started improvising. Upon seeing this, James Avery (Uncle Phil) just went ahead and hugged Smith. If you listen closely, you can hear a cast member crying in the background. There is a debate online as to how much of this urban legend is true (Watt 2016: unpaginated), which misses the point: the fact that this myth exists at all speaks to the cultural significance of the scene. The episode culminates in a powerful twist: the answer to the '*che vuoi?*' posed at the 'Fresh Prince' is not an answer at all, but a question. In response to '*che vuoi?*' Will Smith produces a '*che vuoi?*' of his own: "How come he don't want me, man?" In many ways, this "How come he don't want me, man?" can be seen as the defining phrase of Will Smith's career. What the 'Fresh Prince' effectively wants is to know what the big Other wants of him. Or phrased another way, what do I have to do to be accepted? To be loved? To be inscribed into the symbolic order? Or, posed yet another way: am I really what you say I am? 'A troubled black youth from the ghetto?' Taken to its extreme, this form of questioning can be seen as a kind of hysteria. As Žižek said in an interview in 2018:

Remember what hysteria is? To simplify it, from a psychoanalytic standpoint, society confers on you a certain identity. You are a teacher, professor, woman, mother, feminist, whatever. The basic hysterical gesture is to raise a question and doubt your identity. You're saying I'm this, but why am I this? What makes me this?" Feminism begins with this hysterical question. Male patriarchal ideology constrains women to a certain position and identity, and you begin to ask, but am I really that? (Žižek 2018: unpaginated)

Of course, one could still contest: entertaining as it is to see the 'Fresh Prince' 'hysterically' provoke authority and pose questions pertaining to the self, does that really explain why he became at one point the biggest star in

Hollywood? To understand this, we must examine another layer of Žižek's analysis of anti-Semitism:

Jews are clearly a social symptom: the point at which the immanent social antagonism assumes a positive form, erupts on to the social surface, the point at which it becomes obvious that society 'doesn't work' (...) the 'Jew' appears as an intruder who introduces from outside disorder, decomposition and corruption of the social edifice - it appears as an outward positive cause whose elimination would enable us to restore order stability and identity. (Žižek 1989: 143-144)

Does this not also apply - from a homologous American/fascist perspective - to the 'Fresh Prince'? Or, more precisely, to his symbolic form, to the 'symptom of America': the black rapper from the ghetto, who in the most vulgar and direct way possible incessantly goes on about how society 'doesn't work' – this symbolic figure embodied by the 'Fresh Prince' moves in with the 'perfect' Banks family - an intruder enters the American Dream - and introduces disorder. What is important to understand here is that Žižek does not literally mean that Jews are intruders who introduce corruption into society. What he means is that the fascist utopia of a perfect society without antagonisms only 'works' for the fascist when he also conceives of an enemy within the system. Žižek states:

The proper answer to Anti-Semitism is therefore not 'Jews are not really like that' but 'the anti-Semitic idea of Jew has nothing to do with Jews; the ideological figure of a Jew is a way to stitch up the inconsistency of our own ideological system.' (Žižek 1989: 49)

Society is not prevented from achieving its full identity because of Jews: it is prevented by its own antagonistic nature, by its own immanent blockage, and it 'projects' this negativity into the Jew. (Žižek 1989: 143)

This is the context in which the genius and success of the 'Fresh Prince' can be understood: Smith unabashedly slipped into the guise of the symptom of America, but because he filled this role with teenage hysteria – unlike gangster rappers, who embodied the symptom with vulgar variations of the theme 'society doesn't work' - Smith *inverted* the symptom. Here we have to be precise. This is not to say that the 'Fresh Prince' is not a subversive figure from the perspective of the big Other. What it means is that his

subversiveness is rooted in hysteria. There is no 'hate' or 'will-to-power' in the 'Fresh Prince', no radical idea in the actual *content* of his character, which must be examined separately from his *form*, which resembles 'the symptom' on the one hand, and a young teenager on the other: the 'Fresh Prince' is a teenager who continually questions and undermines both himself and authority, and yet is still drawn to authority (Uncle Phil), as is the ambiguous state of the hysterical subject, who, although he or she may provoke authority, nevertheless must presuppose the existence of an authority in order to do so, paradoxically confirming the other's status as an 'authority' in the process. This is one reason why the hip-hop community never truly warmed up to Will Smith, despite the fact he had tremendous success as an MC. Unlike Tupac, Dr. Dre, and other gangster rappers, Smith didn't point towards the Real of conflict in society. The clearest sign of this, and one that is often pointed out, is the fact Smith that didn't curse in his rap-songs. As the usual narrative goes, Smith was a kind of watered-down, 'hip-hop-light' version for mainstream America. (HipHopDX 2017: video) Although this is true in a certain trivial sense, when it comes to truly grasping Smith's incredible success, it misses the mark. On a deeper level, what made Smith so successful was not his lack of bad language, although this did make him more accessible. It was the way in which Smith managed to blend his rap persona with hysteria and thereby subvert the very symbolic symbol of societal conflict itself.

From the perspective of someone suffering from this symptom, this makes Smith a kind of healer: Smith hystericized a symptom that was linked to feelings of guilt, shame and fear for many Americans. By doing so, he made Americans laugh, question, and enjoy their own painful symptom, thereby providing relief. A look at Smith's most successful films further elaborates this point: After *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* Smith would go on to a star in numerous films and enjoy unprecedented success at the box office: Smith still holds the record for most consecutive films to gross more than 100 million dollars domestically with 8 (Mason 2008: unpaginated). The first of these films was *Independence Day* (Emmerich 1996). The question at the core of this film is once again: '*che vuoi?*' But this time, it's not posed at Smith, it's posed at the 'ultimate Other': what do *aliens* want from us? One of

the more memorable scenes in the film is when, upon seeing the alien for the first time, Smith punches it in the face and proudly proclaims: "Welcome to Earth!" In the most concise way, this scene shows the 'positive effect' of an alien invasion: when confronted with a common enemy, Earthlings unite. It is against the backdrop of an alien invasion that all differences amongst Earthlings – class, race, gender, nationality, etc. - necessarily pale. Aliens highlight our common humanity. This point of view sheds a new perspective on why Will Smith had so much success fighting aliens (*Independence Day* (1996); *Men in Black part 1, 2 and 3* (1997, 2002, 2012)), *Zombies (I am Legend* (2007)) and robots (*Wild Wild West* (1999); *I Robot* (2004)). By battling 'inhuman others' - while still essentially playing the same 'funny' character from *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* - Smith found yet another way to subvert 'America's symptom': through the juxtaposition of 'the symptom' with 'actual aliens', the viewer is relieved of the pain 'the symptom' traditionally causes pain by stating 'society doesn't work'.

There are a few notable exceptions in which Smith has managed to transcend the 'funny guy' from the Fresh Prince and slip into more serious roles. Twice, he has been nominated for an academy award. But here, too, the characters he portrayed, Muhammad Ali and Chris Gardner, are indicative of Smith's persona. *Ali* (Mann, 2001) is the story of the world-class boxer who was stripped of his boxing license for refusing to fight in the Vietnam War. In a Žižekian sense, this is akin to being banished from the symbolic order, a kind of symbolic death. Incredibly, Ali would be resurrected three years later, well past his prime, and go on to slay Goliath in the guise of George Foreman, for which he is now known as 'The Greatest'.

The other film where Smith transcends his 'funny guy' role is the *Pursuit of Happiness* (Muccino, 2006) based on the story of Chris Gardner, a black man who would later become a millionaire but spends the bulk of the film desperately trying to get a job while taking care of his son and sometimes sleeping on the street. A hard-working father without a home, a heavyweight champ without a boxing license - one can easily see both of these characters at some point looking up and crying out: 'How come they don't want me, man?' This is where Smith's genius lies: in the way he has managed to look

straight into the camera, in the guise of America's symptom, and ask the world: 'Am I really what you say I am?'

## Part 2: Barack Obama

In 2008, another African-American man entered the world stage, a man who would quickly become even more popular than Smith. A man who had grown up without a father and seemed at total ease with his 'blackness'. A man who could sing and dance and entertain just like Smith could, but – and herein lies the precise difference between Obama and Smith – Obama wasn't looking into the camera and asking '*che vuio?*' For the most part, he wasn't asking questions at all, he was answering them. He had made "*Change*" his campaign slogan and had set out to just that: change something. And so, in 2008, Barack Obama did 'the impossible' and became the first black President of the United States. It is hard to understate the magnitude of this event from the perspective of the symbolic order: Obama literally became its representative. Seen in this light, a new narrative emerges: We see the 'Fresh Prince', a clownish teenager, trying his best to endear himself to America for over 25 years, fighting his way into society, saving the world from aliens and other obstacles over and over again, until, suddenly, the same man shows up in the guise of a Obama. Only this time, he's not goofing around. 'America's Prince' has grown up and become a man. And he's asking America to anoint him King. In regard to symptoms, Žižek writes:

That is why the final Lacanian definition of the end of the psychoanalytic process is *identification with the Symptom*. The analysis achieves its end when the patient is able to recognize, in the Real of his symptom, the only support of his being. That is how we must read Freud's *wo es war, soll ich werden*: you, the subject, must identify yourself with the place where your symptom already was; in its 'pathological' particularity you must recognize the element which gives consistency to your being. (Žižek 1989: 81)

Smith hystericized America's symptom for over 25 years, and then, finally, in the guise of Obama, America learned it could identify with its symptom – not merely as 'rebels' or 'victims' in opposition to the social order, but as Americans who are the social order. As Kwame Appiah recently claimed in *The Washington Post*: "People don't vote for what they want. They



vote for who they are.” (Appiah 2018, unpaginated) This is the ‘impossible leap’ that defined Obama’s election: the gap between symptom and identification. Famously, Obama’s inauguration brought many to tears. Is this not what patients in psychotherapy traditionally do when coming to terms with a previously ‘unbearable truth’ about themselves? When, in a Freudian sense, ‘id’ becomes ‘ego’? Paradoxically, although Smith can be conceived as someone whose films essentially upheld the status quo – the kind of treatment that alleviates pain but doesn’t treat the root cause of the symptom - he may have brought about more radical change for Black America than any of his radical contemporaries did: his inversion of the symptom opened up the space for America to identify with it.

But what about the symptom itself? one might ask. Doesn’t the effective treatment of a symptom result in its eradication? Yes, and at least to some extent, this is what happened: Will Smith disappeared. In 2008, the year of Obama’s election, Smith starred in two-films: *Hancock* (2008) and *Seven Pounds* (2008). His next film, *Men in Black 3* (2012) would be released four years later. In 2015, at a roundtable with *The Hollywood Reporter*, Smith said: “In retrospect, I realize I had hit a ceiling in my talent. I had a great run that I thought was fantastic, and I realized that I had done everything that I could do with the ‘me’ that I had.” (Belloni and Galloway 2015, unpaginated) Since his hiatus, Will Smith has reemerged as an actor of unpopular films, but more prominently as the father of Willow and Jaden Smith. In 2016, Smith joked about missing out on becoming the first black president and his desire of going into politics (Hoskinson 2016: video). He has also spoken of playing Barack Obama in a film, who has given Smith his blessing to play the role according to Smith (Green and Webster 2017: video).

So if Obama healed America of her symptom, does this mean he also eradicated the racial and economic divide? The answer, of course, is no. After an initial surge in optimism concerning race relations after Obama’s election, Gallup polls in 2016 (Norman) and 2017 (Smith and Newport) have shown that a majority of Americans feel that race relations have gotten worse under Obama. The organization *Black Lives Matter*, founded in 2013 after numerous incidents of police brutality against African Americans, is perhaps most indicative of this. But how are we to make sense of this apparent paradox?

Could it really be that the very president who carried the promise of a 'healed' America ended up making the racial and economic divide worse? What did Obama change? And what happened to the Americans who 'identified with the symptom'? If we are to make any sense of this, we must first take the divide into account that already existed prior to Obama's election. Lest we forget, nearly half of all Americans voted for John McCain in 2008 and then for Mitt Romney in 2012. Presumably, many Republican voters could not identify with Barack Obama as president of the United States. Following this logic, Obama split the country in two: into those who could identify with him (those Americans who made 'the leap' implicit in Obama's famous campaign slogan "Yes We Can"), and those who could not. In a way, this is stating the obvious: every newly elected American president, by one metric or another, splits the electorate. Nevertheless, it's seems apparent that something far more profound was at stake in Obama's election. Because Obama resembled the very symptom that said society 'doesn't work', the process of electing him was elevated into a transformative symbolic act. Plainly stated: how could one elect a man who resembles the symptom that says society 'doesn't work'? The answer is to identify with this symptom on an individual, personal level.

To fully understand this, we must again to take a close look at the function of this symptom and how it carries a different meaning depending on where you stand within the ideological universe of 'America': for a hardline Republican, the symptom of the black rapper connotes a degeneration of traditional cultural norms, the need for stronger law enforcement, problems with the welfare state and immigration. In the classic Republican's view, this is why society 'doesn't work.' For the left, the black rapper *shows* that society 'doesn't work' because the government is corrupt and neglects the poor, because of injustice and a lack of human rights, because of a dysfunctional health care and education system, because of police brutality, unjust wars, the sin of slavery, and so on. Whereas the Right tends to *blame* the 'symptom' for America's shortcomings, the Left tends to *uphold* the 'symptom'. The former, taken to its extreme, bends toward racism, the latter towards fetishisation.

On an individual level, identifying with Obama as President really was transformative, because it meant changing one's stance toward the symptom:

one could not truly identify with Obama and be a racist, just like one could not truly identify with Obama as head of state and still uphold Obama as victim of the same corrupt state. In a way, this explains why Obama managed to win the Nobel Peace Prize shortly after his election: although this decision has often been ridiculed (even by Obama himself (Saul, H. 2016)), in a way, this ridicule misses the point: to the extent that the act of getting elected was always going to be Obama's greatest and most radical achievement, the prize was well-deserved. By leading many Americans to identify with the symptom through himself as president, Obama did transform the country. As Žižek states:

What one must bear in mind here is the radical ontological status of symptom: symptom, conceived as *sinthome*, is literally our only substance, the only positive support for our being, the only point that gives consistency to the subject. In other words, symptom is the way we – the subjects – 'avoid madness', the way we 'choose something (the symptom-formation) instead of nothing (radical psychotic autism, the destruction of the symbolic universe)' through the binding of our enjoyment to a certain signifying, symbolic formation which assures a minimum of consistency to our being-in-the-world.

If the symptom is this radical dimension is unbound, it means literally the "end of the world" – the only alternative to the symptom is nothing: pure autism, psychic suicide, surrender to the death drive, even to the total destruction of the symbolic universe. This is why the final Lacanian definition of the end of the psychoanalytic process is *identification with symptom*." (1989 Žižek: 81)

It is tempting to link Žižek's notion of an "unbound" symptom and corresponding "end of the world" to the "madness" that emerged on the right in the form of the *Tea Party* and the *Birther Movement* after Obama's election. But this would be false. Although these movements did emerge in response to Obama, it is important to note they did not stem from an 'unbound symptom'. Quite to the contrary, these movements more accurately expressed a fear of losing the symptom, a kind of 'clinging' to the symptom. The *Birther Movement* in particular embodied a group's incapability of identifying with Obama. It was an effort to prove that Obama was 'not one of us,' because he allegedly couldn't produce the correct version of his birth certificate. Likewise, populist right-wing claims and insinuations that Obama was a Muslim were yet another racist answer to the question '*che vuio?*', the same question that had

been posed at Will Smith and African-Americans all along. In this sense, much of the right held on to the symptom and continued to blame it for America's shortcomings. Unless they actually did identify with Obama: in which case, at least to some extent, they ceased to be classic right-wing Republicans and became something new. What emerges here are two modes of dealing with a potential 'loss of symptom', with something that threatens to alter that which gives consistency to one's being: one can either flare up defense mechanisms and double down on the symptom, or one can make the leap and actually change. The psychoanalytical statement often made by Žižek: "We don't really want what we think we desire" (Big Think 2012: video) can be understood in this context of 'symptom'. When we 'get what we desire' (an African-American president) the symptom (and all the libidinal energy invested in it) loses its 'power'. As a result, we lose ourselves; we lose that which gave support to our being.

For a leftist, making a leap and identifying with Obama as president of the United States actually meant identifying with America. It meant identifying with the military and drone strikes, it meant identifying with the police and all the institutions that make a nation like America function. It meant suddenly having a stake in the establishment, because one *was* the establishment. This is a radical shift. For many years, the left had existed in opposition to American hegemony. Certainly, throughout the eight George Bush years before Obama, this was their default position. After Obama was elected, Michelle Obama famously said, "for the first time in my adult lifetime, I'm really proud of country" (spaceneedle1000, 2008: video) These statements were treated as proof of her un-Americanness (otherness) on the right. How could one *only now* be proud of the 'greatest nation on Earth'? But it echoed exactly what many on the left felt: Obama had opened up a passage to identification with America.

However, one must ask, is this what the left actually wanted? To identify with the troops and drone strikes? As the years went on, it became clear that Obama's actual politics were not so different from George Bush's. In the first six years of his presidency, Obama bombed seven countries (Afghanistan, Libya, Syria, Yemen, Pakistan, Somalia and Iraq) (Saul 2014: unpaginated). Obama filled his representative role as president with

something new, but he governed in fairly moderate fashion and essentially upheld the status quo. In a nutshell, this is the 'madness' the left was suddenly confronted with: becoming 'the establishment' or ... what exactly?

In search of this 'madness on the left', we shall stick to the subject at hand: Black America. Which, in any case, may very well be the best place to look. After being 'relieved' of Will Smith as their inverted symptomatic representation and being inducted into the symbolic order in the form of Barack Obama only to see race relations allegedly deteriorate in the years thereafter, any recent ideological shift in the African American community is likely to be indicative of the ideological shift in America cultural at large.

### **Part 3: The Black Panther**

One of the biggest recent events within Black America was the release of the film *Black Panther* (Coogler 2018). The Marvel comic book adaptation was deemed "a defining moment" for "Black America" by *The New York Times* (Wallace 2018: unpaginated) and is currently the tenth highest grossing film of all time (Box Office Mojo, 2019). The structure of *Black Panther* is uncannily similar to *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*: a troubled black man from Oakland, who lost his father early in life, is inserted into the fantasy of the fully autonomous, superior black African nation of Wakanda - and chaos ensues. At the heart of the film lies conflict between the cousins Killmonger and T'Challa, who basically fight over the correct way to be a black man in the world, nearly perfectly mirroring the conflict between the cousins Will and Carlton in *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*. Wakanda derives its superpowers from a special metal called vibranium. While the people of Wakanda want to continue to live in peaceful isolation and secrecy, Killmonger, the troubled young black man from Oakland, wishes to use vibranium to aggressively liberate the oppressed black people of the world. The difference between the fantasy of Wakanda and the black Banks family highlights the ideological shift in Black America towards identity politics. The Banks family is fully integrated into the social order: we see a family living the American Dream, the ultimate horizon of what can be accomplished in America - their 'superpowers' are essentially the values espoused by the American Dream: hard work, belief in one's own capabilities, persistence, adherence to the law, i.e. all the values

embodied by Uncle Phil. In Wakanda, on the other hand, we see a fully autonomous, black nation that is technologically superior to the rest of the world - not because of any ideological value structure, but because of some quality that only Wakandians possess, the magical vibranium.

Is this not the utopia of black identity politics? A superior black race, fully independent and autonomous, immersed in a uniquely black culture, uncontaminated by any whiteness or Americanness? And is this ideological shift from the American Dream in *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* to the identity politics of *Black Panther* not homologous to the shift from Martin Luther King proclaiming a more universal humanism during the civil rights movement (Chua 2018: unpaginated) to today's black identity politics culminating in movements like *Black Lives Matter* as well as influential African-American figures like Eric Dyson and Ta-Nehisi-Coates? (Hughes 2018: unpaginated) In his analysis of the film *Black Panther*, Žižek states:

What the beautiful spectacle of Wakanda's capitol obliterates is the insight followed by Malcolm X when he adopted X as his family name (...) Malcolm X's mission was not to mobilize African Americans to fight for the return to some primordial African roots, but precisely to seize the opening provided by X — an unknown, new (lack of) identity engendered by the very process of slavery. This X, which deprives black Americans of their ethnic tradition, offers a unique chance to redefine (reinvent) themselves, to freely form a new identity much more universal than white people's professed universality. (As is well known, Malcolm X found this new identity in the universalism of Islam.) This precious lesson of Malcolm X is forgotten by Black Panther to attain true universality, a hero must go through the experience of losing his or her roots. (Žižek 2018: unpaginated)

This leads us to the following question: where is the universal structure in the film *Black Panther*? Is it only a film about black identity politics or is there more? At first glance, the film seems to lack any 'universal idea', there is no 'American Dream', no notion of transcending the idea of race, no empty 'X': the narrative presupposition being that Blacks with vibranium are superior to all other races and cultures, but live in isolation, while blacks without vibranium are oppressed victims of other races and cultures. The conflict between T'Challa and Killmonger embodies this premise. Just like with Will and Carlton in *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, we again see a conflict between two young black men struggling to find their way in their respective universes

– but who then is the ‘Uncle Phil’, the bearer of the symbolic order, in the universe of *Black Panther*? Both Killmonger’s and T’challa’s fathers die before the film begins, and the wisdom of both fathers seems outdated and not in touch with the problems of their sons. In this sense, the bearer of the big Other seems to be notably missing from the film. Or is it? As Žižek states in his analysis of the film:

Ross (...) is a CIA agent, loyal to the US government, who participates in the Wakandan civil war with an ironic distance, strangely non-engaged, as if he is participating in a show. Why is he selected to shoot down Killmonger’s planes? Isn’t it that he holds the place of the existing global system in the film’s universe? (Žižek 2018, unpaginated)

This is the ironic twist that is easily overlooked in this ‘all-black’ film: it is still the white male CIA agent who holds the place of the existing global order in the film’s universe. Agent Ross is the representative of the big Other, or put another way: Agent Ross is the Uncle Phil of the film. Could it be that this strange twist is also indicative of the state of ideology today? Martin Freeman, an actor perhaps best known for playing Bilbo Baggins in *The Hobbit*, plays Agent Ross. Whereas Uncle Phil is a traditional father figure who commands respect, Agent Ross gets mocked by the black heroes throughout the film, gets called a “colonizer” and a “white boy”. Is this not the perfect representative of the modern liberal, capitalist, white man? A kind of invisible master, omnipresent, somehow always at the right place at the right time, clearly exerting influence, generally not with overt force, but in more ‘subtle’ ways, until finally, in the end, he also gets in a jet and starts shooting? He is the figure black activists put down and make fun of – but in the end, he remains the ultimate horizon of their ideological struggle. As Žižek states:

Identity politics reaches its peak (or, rather, its lowest point) when it refers to the unique experience of a particular group identity as the ultimate fact that cannot be dissolved in any universality: “only a woman/lesbian/trans/Black/Chinese knows what is it to be a woman/lesbian/trans/Black/Chinese.” While this is true in a certain trivial sense, one should thoroughly deny any political relevance to it and shamelessly stick to the old Enlightenment axiom: all cultures and identities can be understood, provided that one makes an effort to get it. The secret of identity politics is that, in it, a white/male/hetero position remains a universal standard; everyone understands it and

knows what it means, which is why it is the blind spot of identity politics, the one identity that it is prohibited to assert.” (Žižek 2018: unpaginated)

Is this not precisely Agent Ross’s role in the film? The white male CIA agent is the “universal standard” and simultaneously the one figure in the film who, in a strange manner, remains unassertive. The final scene of the film further proves this point: after Killmonger dies a heroic death, T’Challa decides to open up Wakanda and share his vibranium technology with the world, in other words, he joins the dominant global capitalist order, and we see Agent Ross smiling approvingly like a father. Have we not seen this ‘graduation scene’ before? Can we not easily see Uncle Phil smiling in the same manner when Will graduates from university? Does the very form of this scene not give away the subconscious of the film? T’Challa has ‘grown up’ and joined the ‘global order’. He has become a man, the narrative of the film seems to suggest, he has slayed his demons in the form of Killmonger, the ‘angry version of identity politics’, and joined the current liberal capitalist ideology, where everyone gets to hold onto their identity, is even encouraged to, as long as they submit to the current ‘capitalist ideology’, an ideology nowadays perhaps best represented in the PC-friendly approach of corporate giants like Google, Facebook, and Twitter, or, in the case of the film *Black Panther*: by CIA Agent Ross. This is the universality the film promises in the end.

The true conflict of the film therefore cannot be between T’Challa and Killmonger, because they both have the *same problem*: how to deal with Agent Ross? This is the real tension at the heart of the film: how can one reconcile black identity politics with the universality of global capitalism? Moreover, how do we even define ‘global capitalism’? Who is Agent Ross? In a nutshell, this is the same problem the left faces: is there an alternative to Agent Ross? Is there an alternative for the left to this extreme form of identity politics, to this ‘clinging to the symptom’, an alternative that would exist outside the global corporate elite?

#### **Part 4: Kanye West**

Referring to racism, Kanye West said on *Jimmy Kimmel Live!* in 2018:



They keep us so focused on history that we start to believe that it actually repeats itself and we become overly traditional and we can't advance as a race of beings. We get too caught up in the past and what everyone's saying and what everyone's tweeting, and sometimes you just have to be fearless enough to break the fucking simulation.” (Maureen 2018, video)

West's reference to “the simulation” is sure to conjure up notions of *The Matrix* (Wachowski and Wachowski 1999); the sci-fi hit that inspired a generation to engage in pseudo-philosophical speculations on the nature of reality. Outlandish as these comments by West may seem, I believe they warrant a closer look. In his analysis of the *The Matrix*, Žižek says:

What, then, is the Matrix? Simply what Jacques Lacan called the "big Other," the virtual symbolic order, the network that structures reality for us. In a properly paranoid way, the film externalizes this virtual symbolic order in the really-existing Mega-Computer. (Žižek 1999: unpaginated)

West goes on to explain what he means by “the simulation” in the Jimmy Kimmel interview, and much of what he says indeed fits the Lacanian notion of the big Other:

Here's an idea of why you're in a simulation, let's start with acting. First of all, when a 2-year-old screams at a restaurant, the entire restaurant screams: 'teach that kid how to act!' We're all unpaid actors in some giant script that we didn't write. A two-year-old jumps on a coffee table and someone says, that's a 'coffee table', don't jump on that, so it went from being something that makes him feel like superman, he's got his cape on, to something where he has to think about this person who's probably like a family member he doesn't like anyway. He's a two-year-old, he doesn't give a fuck about a 'coffee' or a 'table', and he's starting to like calculate all this things, and by the time you're 40 years old, you've got a wall full of coffee tables, calculating you into traffic, calculating you into your career choice, calculating you into this town house that's not quite as big as ... and it just never works (...) that's what I mean when I say simulation. (Maureen 2018, video)

Kanye explains how a child with no concept of language “feels like superman”. Then a ‘prohibiting agency’ comes along and starts ‘naming’ things and as a result, the child loses his feeling of omnipotence. This is very close to the Lacanian process of ‘symbolic castration’ (Cahiers pour L’analyse: unpaginated), the process by which children are inducted to the

world of language and paternal rules, mediated into the 'symbolic order', thereby losing access to *jouissance*. Generally speaking, when a black rapper says something like 'break the simulation' (or as N.W.A famously rapped "Fuck tha Police" (Wright 1988)), this is in accord with their role as 'symptom'; by expressing their opposition to the dominant social order, they are once again saying society 'doesn't work'. When in 2006, in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, Kanye West went on live television and famously stated: "George Bush doesn't care about black people" (Schockroc1, 2006: video), he was doing precisely this. And yet, Kanye is now well known for his vocal support of Trump, a president who is consistently attacked for being, among other things, a racist. Paradoxical as this seems, it makes sense: if West 'lost the symptom' through identification with Obama (and by extension with America), then it's only logical that he would reject a left that 'clings to this symptom' and therefore expects him, West, to act accordingly, i.e. play the part of a rapper who shows why society 'doesn't work.' Echoing this sentiment, West tweeted on Jan. 1, 2019: "One of my favorite of many things about what the Trump hat represents to me is that people can't tell me what to do because I'm black." (West 2019)

One can explain West's reversal from Bush-critic to Trump-supporter by way of his 'identification with the symptom', and yet, paradoxically, one can also claim that on a different level, West is actually one of the few rappers who did not change during the Obama years. West is famous for being brutally honest and egomaniacal (Sakamoto 2013: unpaginated). As an artist, it's arguably in his nature to oppose anything that puts limits on his range of expression. Judging by his defiant pro-Trump stance despite harsh criticism from the PC left, which includes many of his peers, it seems accurate to claim that West has remained true to form, or in rapper's parlance, 'stayed real'. Through and through, West remains in opposition to the stifling simulation. In other words: West has indeed changed his stance towards the 'symptom', but because 'the simulation' did as well, because it 'clung' to this very symptom, the form of West's defiant posture has remained consistent: In 2019, it is no longer conservatives telling black men what they can and can't do in America, it is the PC left.

In order to grasp how the left got here, there is yet one more aspect about the left's relationship to the symptom that has to be examined. At the moment, one could still ask: did the left 'cling to the symptom' or did the left 'lose the symptom' through identification with it and become the system in the process? The tension between these two possibilities was the 'madness' the left was confronted with after Obama's election, and it was resolved with a twist: the politically correct left became the system *and* implemented its symptom, the fetishisation of minorities, as the new social order. This contradictory stance of simultaneously staking claims to victimhood while being in power and controlling the narrative is essentially the left's default position today. It is the lens through which societal overreaches in identity politics and political correctness can be understood, but also the context in which Obama's greatest achievement can be grasped: his election nevertheless opened up the space for African Americans to truly 'go to the end' and identify with America, to be Americans in the truest sense, to even be conservatives if they so choose, and therefore, in some sense, be free of race.

Of course, rejecting the new PC left does not necessarily make one a Trump supporter, but even this is not so simple. Trump positioned himself as an anti-establishment candidate from the beginning, and to the extent that the PC left now represents part of the establishment, Trump has kept this promise, a dynamic which many analysts, including Žižek, attributed in part to Trump's election win. (Lilla 2016, unpaginated; Žižek 2017, unpaginated) But there is more to the Trump phenomenon than mere politics. In the past years, Trump's persona has been elevated to near mythical status by the left, arguably to that of an archetypical villain. One of the lesser-known readings of the Trump phenomenon is that of "uncastrated primal father" (Rapoport 2016, unpaginated). In this interpretation, Trump is above all a man who can 'do anything': he can run a campaign with his own money, he can lie and cheat, he can say whatever he wants and get away with it. Is this not reminiscent of the primordial father in *Totem and Taboo*? In Freud's classic myth, a primordial father has all the women. A band of brothers, living in celibacy, come together to murder the father. (Freud 1913: 189-216) This is the first

part of the myth, an alternate take on the Oedipus complex, the narrative description of the classic psychoanalytical conflict. As Žižek states:

Why did Freud supplement the Oedipal myth with the mythical narrative of the "primordial father" in Totem and Taboo (T&T)? The lesson of this second myth is the exact obverse of the Oedipus: far from having to deal with the father who, intervening as the Third, prevents direct contact with the incestuous object (thus sustaining the illusion that his annihilation would give us free access to this object), it is the killing of the father, i.e., the very realization of the Oedipal wish, which gives rise to symbolic prohibition (the dead father returns as his Name). And today's much-decried "decline of Oedipus" (of the paternal symbolic authority) is precisely the return of figures which function according to the logic of the "primordial father" from "totalitarian" political leaders to the paternal sexual harasser. But why? When the "pacifying" symbolic authority is suspended, the only way to avoid the debilitating deadlock of desire, its inherent impossibility, is to locate the cause of its inaccessibility into a despotic figure which stands for the primordial jouisseur: we cannot enjoy because HE amasses all enjoyment... (Žižek 1997, unpaginated)

In light of the fact that Trump's most 'popular' statement arguably is: "Grab them by the pussy. You can do anything." (Cline 2017: video), the rise of authoritarian populist leaders around the globe, and the PC left's as well as media's obsession with Trump and his transgressions (Leetaru 2018: unpaginated), the above statements by Žižek seem particularly prevalent. While an analysis of the factors that have led to a "decline in Oedipus" is beyond the scope of this essay, a reading of Trump as "primordial jouisseur" can arguably shed light on the PC left's negative obsession with him and where we stand ideologically today. More than anyone on Earth, Trump is the living embodiment of the politically correct transgression. He can transgress (*enjoy*) while others can (or shall) not. As a result, in the moral universe of the PC left, *negating Trump* has become a commandment of the highest order, as well as the simplest way to 'virtue-signal' one's affiliation to the PC group ('band of brothers'). This has very important implications not only for the PC left, but also for their opponents: because opposing Trump has become a quasi-religious commandment within a large part of our political and cultural discourse, any principled opposition to the PC left's moral doctrine has the capacity to quickly lead one down the path towards *affirming Trump*, simply on the grounds of dismissing the PC left's injunction to *negate Trump*.

While the left has tried to dismiss Kanye West's support for Trump as an isolated, crazy phenomenon among African Americans, this is far from the truth. Polls in October 2018 showed Trump's approval rating among African Americans ranging from 16,5% to 40% (Svab, 2018: unpaginated). This makes a definite statement difficult, but Trump's support among African Americans is on the rise. (Enten 2018: unpaginated) The most prominent new black voice to emerge in the wake of Trump is Candace Owens, who *The Washington Post* recently called "the new face of black Conservatism." (Nelson 2019: unpaginated) The eloquent 30-year-old's principled fighting posture ironically resembles that of a black civil rights activist from the 1960s, and indeed, she is talking about freedom in an emancipatory fashion, but once again the script is flipped: Owens has cofounded the #blexit movement, which encourages blacks to leave the "democratic plantation" where they have been "mentally enslaved". She fights against "victimhood mentality" (Nelson 2019: unpaginated) and urges Black Americans to join the conservative movement. In an interview in 2018, she said:

My take, after spending some time with him, is that Kanye West is not a conservative. He's not a Republican, but he is a free thinker and he's an independent thinker. And in these days, if you believe in free thinking, that is a conservative position. If you believe that people have the right to express their ideas, regardless of their skin color, [that] people have a right to like people outside of the political realm, that is a conservative position. The reason that we're seeing so many people flee the left—I like to call them liberal refugees, like myself—is because they do not allow you to think freely." (Montalbano 2018, unpaginated)

The irony in these statements, as well as the contradiction, is indicative of our times: in Owens' view, Kanye West is neither a conservative nor a Republican – despite his support of Trump. Above all, he's a free thinker. "Free thinking" has become something conservative in her view, because "the left" no longer allows one to do this. The appropriation of free speech by conservatives is yet another variation of the common theme uniting opponents of the PC-left: rejection of the 'clinging to the symptom' and the 'implementation of the symptom as law.'

To summarize: We see Will Smith (most prominently yet not exclusively, for the sake of clarity I have limited myself to Smith in this essay)

hysterically subvert 'the symptom' that states that society 'doesn't work'. This opened of the space for true identification with Obama as president, which thus forced individuals to either cling to or identify with 'the symptom' – a near impossible task for much of the left, which was resolved in a twist: a portion of the left identified with the establishment and implemented its symptom as law. The film *Black Panther* is indicative of this new PC 'symptom as law', while black figures like Kanye West and Candace Owens embody the rejection of this fetishisation of the symptom. Trump, on the other hand, embodies the politically correct transgression itself. Although the rise of extreme political correctness and identity politics can also be linked to other societal phenomena like the rise of social media, postmodernism, and a general crisis on the left (during his debate with Jordan Peterson, Žižek said of the PC left: "I think it's a hypermoralisation (...) which is a silent admission of a defeat" (Škraba 2019: video)), the extent and swiftness with which the PC left has entered and changed our cultural narratives still remains somewhat of a mystery. I believe that the subconscious ideological role of 'America's symptom' is essential to fully grasping this shift in our ideological landscape.

Before the 2016 presidential election, Žižek said he would vote for Trump given the chance (Belinski 2016: video). He has since explained this statement in many different ways, stating that Hillary Clinton as representative of the status quo was the real danger, his hope for radical change, and "both are worse" (Žižek 2019: unpaginated). He has also attacked Trump many times since then, and yet, something about the notion of Žižek voting for Trump seems to stick in an odd way, to ring true beyond mere political strategy and logic: was it not the Žižekian impulse to 'take things to the end' while opposing the oppressive 'simulation'?

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