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Can a signifier float? Or, implications

Lévi-Strauss and the aporia of the symbolic

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pp. 2

Abstract

This essay centers on the notion of the symbolic and its impact as developed by Claude Lévi-Strauss in his Introduction to the Work of Marcel Mauss. I examine Lévi-Strauss' formulation of the "floating signifier" and its influence in French thought, particularly in the work of Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida. In doing so, I argue that Lévi-Strauss' notion may be a misreading of the structural linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure that has important implications for contemporary political issues on the left in both theory and practice.
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Footnotes | References | Details

bookmark

Outline

Introduction: The Politics of Structure
The Importance of Exchange: Structure and "Pure Symbol" in Lévi-Strauss
The "Floating Signifier": From Symbol to Symbolic
Figure 1
Can a Signifier Float?
Impacts of the Symbolic: Lacan and Derrida
Conclusions

> *The constantly affirmed concern with "respecting the culture of the native populations" accordingly does not signify taking into consideration the values borne by the culture, incarnated by men.... Phrases such as "I know them," "that's the way they are," show this maximum objectification successfully achieved.... Exoticism is one of the forms of this simplification. It allows no cultural confrontation. There is on the one hand a culture in which qualities of dynamism, of growth, of depth can be recognized. As against this, we find characteristics, curiosities, things, never a structure.*
>
> *(Fanon 34-35)*

1 | Introduction: The Politics of Structure

1 By the time Frantz Fanon delivered these words in September 1956 at the First Congress of Negro Writers and Artists in Paris, the structural anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss had gone from influential primarily in French academic circles (with 1949's *Les Structures Élémentaires de la Parenté*) to international acclaim with the 1955 publication of *Tristes Tropiques*, in which, as Jeffery Melhman notes, Lévi-Strauss comes face to face with his own youthful exoticization of "savages" (12-14). While Fanon is not directly addressing Lévi-Strauss' work here, there may be no better statement of its fundamental thesis. For both Fanon and Lévi-Strauss, exoticizing objectification in the anthropology of the mid-twentieth century precludes seeing cultures as possessed of dynamism, growth, and depth. It does this by, and Fanon could not have used a better word, occluding "structure" in favor of "curiosities," hiding essence with accident in classical terms. [1] In the case of Lévi-Strauss, the complex analysis of *The Elementary Structures*, the elegiac poeticism of *Tristes Tropiques*, and the attack on Sartre's existentialist humanism found in last chapter of *La Pensée Sauvage* are all founded on the notion that social, or better symbolic, structure is that which unites all human cultures despite the clear differences that exist between cultures. That is, Lévi-Strauss sees in structure a new approach to anthropology which can overcome cultural chauvinism and will ultimately re-value the West's narrative of cultural development, rescuing it from the Eurocentric narrative of Whiggish history. Of course, Lévi-Strauss is very different from Fanon. The latter is a thinker of structural difference rather than of structural unity. Nevertheless, the connection between to the two is clear enough: both believe structure is that which allows us to see beyond what Fanon calls "curiosities" to value all cultures equally. On Lévi-Strauss' structural paradigm, then, cultural variation is to be understood not as something exotic but rather as that necessarily proceeds from universal structures.

2 Born in 1908, Lévi-Strauss is best known as the founder of structural

anthropology and a seminal figure in twentieth century French thought. There are numerous reasons for this, but one of the more important is that structural anthropology was not developed apolitically. Rather, despite its grounding in what can look like pure formalism, structural anthropology can be understood as, to borrow a term from one of what Lévi-Strauss calls one of his three "mistresses," a therapeutic human science. (2) That is, structural anthropology seeks to treat the metaphorical neurosis of anthropology that produces exoticism. To reveal the structure of kinship, as Lévi-Strauss does in *Elementary Structures* is to demystify the relations that undergird both human society and the sciences that study it. One might say that Lévi-Strauss takes the convictions of one his great influences, the cultural anthropologist Franz Boas, and applies to them the more or less continental vision of the human sciences as rigorous and critical (think Marx and Freud). In order to do this, he relies on a particular methodology: the structural linguistics developed by the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure as they came down through the Prague linguistic circle, most notably Roman Jakobson with whom Lévi-Strauss had a correspondence.

3 As it turns out, however, that methodological decision, or more precisely Lévi-Strauss' treatment of it, may have consequences hitherto unexamined. In this paper, I will explore Lévi-Strauss' development of the structure of symbolic exchange, specifically the central role of what Lévi-Strauss called "the floating signifier." The focus on what Jacques Lacan will later dub the Symbolic Order produced what philosopher Catherine Malabou has called the "aporia of the symbol" in French thought. That aporia of the symbol, or better of the symbolic, (3) has had a major impact on poststructural thinking—the theoretical paradigm under which most humanistic disciplines (with the exception of Anglo-American philosophy) find themselves today. I will argue that the aporia of the symbolic stems from a misreading of a central moment in structural linguistics, one that becomes legible when we closely examine the ways in which Lévi-Strauss gets the notion of the symbolic off the ground, so to speak.

4 I will disagree with Melhman's reading here. Melhman notes the conceptual looseness Lévi-Strauss applies to Saussure's terms "signifier" and "signified," but reads that looseness as first a "subver[sion]" of Saussure (23-24), and then a reversal of that subversion with Lévi-Strauss "return[ing]" to a "Saussurean usage" (24). Rather than a subversion and return, I see in Lévi-Strauss' account of the floating signifier an error, i.e. the confusion of a methodological distinction and a category of conceptual content, or what I will call the transfiguration of method into a metaphysics. In the transition from Saussure to Lévi-Strauss, a central point of structural linguistic theory gets lost. (4) That point—which has to do with relation of the signifier to the signified—lies at the very heart of structural linguistics, arguably as important to it as is the arbitrariness of the sign. The problem I discuss here may indicate the ways in which the science of semiotics that Saussure dreamed of is not in fact possible precisely because the structural move is primarily, even essentially, a linguistic methodology. This is not to say, of course, that structuralism in fields other than linguistics has been fruitless. Rather, it is a matter of following through the logic of Lévi-Strauss in the light of Saussure and seeing what it yields. If it yields an aporia, perhaps it is not because structure or symbol is essentially aporetic, but rather that perhaps we have misunderstood the problem. My task in what follows then is to discuss symbolic exchange according to Lévi-Strauss, specifically what makes it possible, i.e. the floating signifier. In doing so, I will return to Saussure in order to query Lévi-Strauss. Next, I examine the impact of the floating signifier on two other thinkers, Lacan and Derrida, before finally drawing some conclusions about the contemporary turn to what some call identity politics.

5 Many of those whom I will refer to as poststructural thinkers generatively respond to a worrying aspect of Lévi-Straussian structure, its apparent totalization and its tendency to mathematize human life, by looking for—in Derrida's words—something like "play" within the structure. This search for play requires a turn away from universal structure and toward specific content, which has had an important influence on contemporary humanistic thought. Put directly, I argue that the aporia of the symbolic arising from Lévi-Strauss' formulation of the floating signifier gives focus to, if not inaugurates, what is often referred to pejoratively as identity politics and less pejoratively as standpoint epistemology. If it is the case that we are now more than ever seeing the ascendance of so-called identity politics, and if it is also the case that in French thought a course correction occurred in the wake of Lévi-Strauss' work that played a role in that rise, then it is important to go back to Lévi-Strauss and to Saussure to query this signal moment. To put my cards on the table, it is my view that the more radical versions of standpoint epistemology—such as Afro-pessimism—block the unifying tendency of structural thought, thereby fragmenting political power. If what Malabou calls the aporia of the symbolic has contributed to what is widely seen as the intense fragmentation of postmodernity, a political symptom of which can said to be the rise of standpoint epistemology, then we ought to make sure that what's bothering us stems from a coherent account. If it doesn't, perhaps we can begin to see otherwise.

2 | The Importance of Exchange: Structure and "Pure Symbol" in Lévi-Strauss

6 There are many striking aspects of Lévi-Strauss' first major work, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*: the audacity of its thesis and its originality to name only two. The most bizarre aspect of the book, though, must be the appendix to Part One, titled "On the algebraic study of certain types of marriage laws (Murngin system)," written by the eminent mathematician and brother of Simone, André Weil. In English, the appendix begins with the following truly striking sentence: "In these few pages, written at Lévi-Strauss's request, I propose to show how a certain type of marriage laws can be interpreted algebraically, and how algebra and the theory of groups of substitutions can facilitate its study and classification" (221). Without a few samples of the appendix it is impossible to get a sense of it:

> *At all events, let the number of types of marriage be n. We arbitrarily designate them by n symbols, e. g., M1, M2,..., Mn....*
> *Consequently, the type of marriage which a son descended from a marriage of type Mi (i being one of the numbers 1, 2,..., n) may contract is a function of Mi, which, following the normal mathematical notation in such cases, can be designated by f(Mi). It would be the same for a daughter, the corresponding function, which we shall designate by g(Mi), usually being distinct from the former. From the abstract point of view, knowledge of the two functions, f and g, completely determines the marriage rules in the society studied....*
> *Take a simple example. Let us suppose a four-class society, with generalized exchange, of the following type:*
> *There are four types of marriage: (M1) A man, B woman; (M2) B man, C woman; (M3) C man, D woman; (M4) D man, A woman. Let us further assume*
> *that the children of a mother of class A, B, C, D are respectively of class B, C, D, A. Our table is then as follows:*
> *(Parents' marriage type) M1 M2 M3 M4*
> *(Son's marriage type) f(Mi)=M3 M4 M1 M2*
> *(Daughter's marriage type) g(Mi)=M2 M3 M4 M1 ...*
> *We now introduce a new condition:*
> *(C) Any man must be able to marry his mother's brother's daughter.*
> *Let us express this condition algebraically. Let us consider a brother and a sister, descended from a marriage of the Mi type. The brother will have to contract an f(Mi) marriage, so that his daughter will contract a g[f(Mi)] marriage. The sister must contract a g(Mi) marriage, so that her son will contract an f[g(Mi)] marriage. Condition (C) will thus be expressed by the relationship:*
> *f[g(Mi)]=g[f(Mi)]. (emphasis added, 221-223)*

7 Thus Weil and Lévi-Strauss. To argue that human relations such as marriage can be reduced to what amounts to algebraic formulae is as the very least counterintuitive, and at the most deeply troubling. [5] For now though, we need only note that *Elementary Structures* concerns itself with what we might as well call the algebra of endogamy and exogamy as a way of expressing the structure of kinship, with marriage being its exemplar. But this algebraic account of marriage is, it turns out, only the beginning for Lévi-Strauss. In *Elementary Structures* he has not yet reached his final account of structure. In that final account, the algebraic will becomes less an applied method than itself a structural figure. That is, it won't be long before the algebraic logic applied in *The Elementary Structures* is applied to something far more all-encompassing than marriage patterns; namely, what the early Lévi-Strauss will come to see as the universal and fundamental quality of the human—symbolic exchange.

8 Lévi-Strauss' radical reconsideration of the symbol becomes fully legible in his 1950 *Introduction to the Work of Marcel Mauss*. Mauss (1872-1950), the nephew of the sociologist Émile Durkheim, is probably best known for his theory of the gift, although his discussions of magic and sacrifice were also important in post-War France. It is with the notion of the gift in Mauss that Lévi-Strauss begins his generative critique of Mauss. "The *Essai sur la don* [*The Gift*]," writes Lévi-Strauss, "...inaugurates a new era for the social sciences, just as phonology did for linguistics" (*Mauss* 41). Just a few sentences later, and not surprisingly, Lévi-Strauss goes on to another analogy, that of mathematics: the impact of the *Essai* "can best be compared to the discovery of combinatorial analysis for modern mathematical thinking" (41-42). He writes too that "as early as 1924" Mauss had seen what fellow cultural anthropologist and Lévi-Strauss influence Ruth Benedict posed in her 1934 *Patterns of Culture*: namely that individual and culture are entwined and enmeshed in an essential way that Lévi-Strauss quoting Mauss calls "a world of symbolic relationships" (10). According to Lévi-Strauss, and as Lévi-Strauss biographer Patrick Wilcken puts it, Mauss then is—like Benedict—"a proto-structuralist" precisely because Mauss foresees the importance of symbolic exchange (184). But Lévi-Strauss' praise of Mauss is not unilateral, and in fact it is with a critique of Mauss that Lévi-Strauss articulates the structure of symbolic: "Why did Mauss halt at the edge of those immense possibilities, like Moses conducting his people all the way to a promised land whose splendour he would never behold," writes Lévi-Strauss (45). Indeed, Lévi-

Strauss makes sure to drive the point home at the end of the same paragraph writing, "There must be some crucial move, somewhere, that Mauss missed out" upon (ibid). What Mauss missed out, it turns out, is the symbolic itself. That is, Mauss sees symbolic exchange as concretized in the exchange of the gift but he, on Lévi-Strauss' view, confuses that which is exchanged with exchange itself.

9 Like Lévi-Strauss, Mauss argues that exchange and reciprocity form the bases for all human interaction. And importantly, Mauss focuses on symbolic exchange, claiming that the gift—although it looks like a non-reciprocal exchange—in fact involves reciprocity. According to Mauss, when a gift is given, the giver is rewarded with an increase in what we might call social or cultural capital. This fact is particularly visible in certain traditions in Mauss' view, specifically those of the potlatch in indigenous cultures of the Pacific Northwest, the notion of *hau* (and *mana* in Mauss' work on magic) in Polynesian societies, and the *kula* exchange of New Guinean cultures. The basic idea can be easily seen: In something like the potlatch, the giver of the gift *appears* to give without concern for recompense. If this is true, the giving of a gift would exceed the structure of exchange (cf. Bataille on waste in *La Part Maudite*). But as Mauss has it, even if it appears that the person hosting the potlatch gives away much or all of what is valuable to her, she is rewarded with cultural prestige, so in fact it is an exchange. The same appears to be true in the case of the Maori and *hau*, in which the giver receives in exchange for his or her material gift a quantum of cultural capital. So for Mauss, the notions of *mana* and *hau*—magical power that animates the social power of magic, and the gift, respectively—are what activate exchange. Put another way, Mauss sees symbolic exchange as it is demonstrated in the gift as the exchange of social power or cultural capital.

10 But for Lévi-Strauss the fact that, again quoting Mauss, "*Mana*... plays the role of the copula in a proposition" represents Mauss' reliance on what Lévi-Strauss calls "magical or affective notions" (50). Ultimately, Lévi-Strauss argues against imagined notions like *mana* and *hau* as explanations for apparently "empty" exchanges. According to Lévi-Strauss, they do not explain exchange by their assumed presence, but rather the fact that similar notions exist across cultures indicates that they are a kind of excess produced by what really does exist: the structure of exchange as such. When we exchange, we don't arrive at a theory of value from the act of exchange. Exactly the opposite is true. Exchange is the human condition, and theories of the value of exchange, be they material or magical, result from that condition. Thus, ideas like *mana* and *hau* are conceived in order to justify the structure of exchange that exists before such ideas. As Lévi-Strauss puts all this:

> *Exchange is not a complex edifice built on the obligations of giving, receiving and returning, with the help of some emotional-mystical cement. It is a synthesis immediately given to, and given by, symbolic thought, which, in exchange as in any other form of communication, surmounts the contradiction inherent in it; that is the contradiction of perceiving things as elements of dialogue, in respect of self and others simultaneously, and destined by nature to pass from one to the other. The fact that those things may be the one's or the other's (author's emphasis) represents a situation which is derivative from the original aspect. (Mauss 59, emphasis added)*

11 Here, no doubt following the Marx of *Das Kapital*, Lévi-Strauss claims to have deduced the structure of exchange from notions like *mana* and *hau* rather than vice versa, indicating that it is not content that is important but exchange per se. Mauss' analysis of *hau* and *mana* reveals the structure of exchange precisely because the concrete content of exchange is abstracted out. But Lévi-Strauss remains up against the question of the origin of exchange itself. Why does exchange exist at all, especially if it is not animated by social or other value like *mana*? The answer Lévi-Strauss provides is drawn from the structural linguistics of Saussure through the Prague circle (and from Marx) and it will involve positing the existence of a symbolic structure of exchange as the fundamental and universal characteristic of the human, of which language is the paradigmatic example. Before we look closely at the origins of Lévi-Strauss' symbolic structuralism and the role of the floating signifier, however, let us recall the very basics of Saussure's work. [6]

12 Saussure proposed a tripartite model of language grounded in what he calls *langue*. *Langue* consists of the synchronic structural rules that allow for any language to exist all. The most obvious example here, and the key one for Lévi-Strauss, is that of differentiation between signs. Second, there is *langage* which amounts to the specific diachronically understood language or languages being discussed, e.g. English, French and so on. Finally, we have *parole*—the act of individual speech. Saussure's distinction between the three serves methodological exigencies. That is, Saussure wishes to move linguistics away from the diachronic study of languages (*langages*) e.g. philology as linguistics, as well as away from the structurally insignificant study of acts of individual speech, in order to focus linguistic study on the ways in which language as a structure (*langue*) works, more or less universally. So while Saussure is foremost a linguist, he sees his structural method, a method made possible by the distinctions of *langue*, *langage* and *parole*, as being the first step in the

foundation of a new science of man that he dubs semiology, or the science of signs, or better sign structures, of which language is paradigmatic (Saussure, 16).

13 For Lévi-Strauss, the allure of structural linguistics, or more properly, the generalized approach of semiology, is clear. It allows him to draw from existing systems of exchange a generalized structure that he believes undergirds all systems and acts of exchange—a *langue* of symbols, if you will. For him, this is true science. As he puts it, Mauss' reliance on *mana* is a recourse to "notions of sentiment, fated inexorability, the fortuitous and the arbitrary," which are to him, as he bluntly states, simply "not scientific" (56). Indeed, Lévi-Strauss writes that "in one case, at least, the notion of *mana* does present those characteristics of a secret power, a mysterious force, which Durkheim and Mauss attributed to it: for such is the role it plays in their own system" (57). So structural linguistics offers Lévi-Strauss an escape from the study of diachronic systems of exchange, instead opening up a new vista upon the synchronic structure of exchange.

14 But to return to the question of symbolic exchange, Lévi-Strauss seems compelled to address the question of why the structure of symbolic exchange exists in the first place. Why do we exchange at all? In answering that question, he appears to offer precisely the kind of unscientific narrative that he accuses Mauss himself of falling victim to. Typically, perhaps, the structuralist approach seeks to "to eliminate all historical speculation, all research into origins, and all attempts to reconstruct a hypothetical order in which institutions succeeded one another," as Lévi-Strauss puts it regarding marriage in *Elementary Structures* (143). Here in *Mauss*, though, Lévi-Strauss shows little of that methodological reserve, causing things to get more than a bit odd:

> *It is in th[e] relational aspect of symbolic thinking that we can look for the answer to our problem. Whatever may have been the moment and the circumstances of its appearance in the ascent of animal life, language can only have arisen all at once. Things cannot have begun to signify gradually. In the wake of a transformation which is not a subject of study for the social sciences, but for biology and psychology, a shift occurred from a stage when nothing had a meaning to another stage when everything had meaning. Actually, that apparently banal remark is important, because that radical change has no counterpart in the field of knowledge, which develops slowly and progressively. In other words, at the moment when the entire universe all at once became significant, it was none the better known for being so, even if it is true that the emergence of language must have hastened the rhythm of the development of knowledge. So there is a fundamental opposition, in the history of the human mind, between symbolism, which is characteristically discontinuous, and knowledge, characterized by continuity (60, emphasis added)*

15 This moment can in my view only be called an irruption of metaphysics into what is supposed to be a simple overview of Mauss' work. Like Rousseau in the "Essay on the Origin of Languages," Lévi-Strauss offers what amounts to a "just so" story, a primal scene of language in antiquity; one that in essence allows him to develop its implications into the radical thesis of symbolic exchange. Lévi-Strauss claims here that the all-at-once appearance of language was by *fiat* or revelation despite his nominal invocations of the explanatory of power biology and psychology. I would go so far as to say that Lévi-Strauss' own language (*parole*) in this passage makes it clear enough that unlike Rousseau, for whom language (*langue*) develops out of specific necessity, the appearance of language resembles nothing so much as divine intervention for Lévi-Strauss. This is not to say that Lévi-Strauss' views are religious, of course. Rather we ought to note that in order to produce his account, he must bring to bear his own mythology of sorts in order to birth his theory of symbolic exchange. For it is the case precisely that here *langue* is used just as Saussure hoped it would be—as a methodological inroad to a broader, generalized science of the sign, i.e. semiology. And it is the theory of the symbol that undergirds Lévi-Strauss' semiological anthropology that concerns us here, for it will come to replace the alliance theory of endogamy and exogamy he works out in *Elementary Structures* with something far more, it will turn out, provocative.

3 | The "Floating Signifier": From Symbol to Symbolic

16 Again on page 60 of *Mauss*, Lévi-Strauss writes:

> *the two categories of the signifier and the signified came to be constituted simultaneously and interdependently, as complementary units; whereas knowledge, that is the intellectual process which enables us to identify certain aspects of the signifier and certain aspects of the signified, one by reference to the other... only got started very slowly. (emphasis added)*

17 It is here that we can begin to see the theory of symbol and thus the notion of the symbolic order that Lévi-Strauss proposes being laid out. The symbolic was born

as a twin to language. Through symbolic thought, which is to say through meaning making, Lévi-Strauss argues, we can accomplish "the work of equalising the signifier with the signified," and this, he claims, is precisely the ultimate goal of science (*Mauss* 62). [7] In fact, equalising the signifier with the signified seems to mean something like the process of gaining knowledge for Lévi-Strauss, and it is here that we can return briefly to the Fanon quote with which we began, and to the relation of structuralism to politics.

18 In a rebuke to the Eurocentricity of the continental human sciences, in a rebuke to the very thought we see Fanon lambaste above, Lévi-Strauss argues in *Mauss* that the human search for knowledge is a constant in all cultures. What this means, in turn, is that there is no "gulf" between symbolic thought and the quest for knowledge, that the difference in the two is "one of degree, not of nature" (62). If this is true, then although what I am calling the search for understanding "has been pursued more methodically and rigorously from the time modern science was born" (ibid), that search is in no way unique to modernity or to Europe. Rather, as Lévi-Strauss argues it, "[w]e can therefore expect the relationship between symbolism and knowledge to conserve common features in non-industrial societies and in our own" (ibid). All of this is to say then that (A) human beings are the types of beings that dwell in meaning ("knowledge"), (B) language and the symbolic allow us to understand meaning, as does science, as we equalize signifier and signified, and (C) this means that science and symbolic thinking serve the same purpose, i.e. to facilitate understanding. Therefore, to the extent that some "primitive" non-Western societies rely on symbolic exchange to understand the world, just as modern Europeans putatively rely on science to understand the world, members of these ostensibly pre-scientific societies are not *fundamentally* different from modern European scientists. They are not, in Fanon's words, exoticized sets of "characteristics, curiosities, things" but instead are cultures very much in possession "of dynamism, of growth, of depth." All cultures are so, according to Lévi-Strauss, precisely because all cultures exchange symbols as they seek to answer questions, or in Straussian terms, to equalise signifier and signified. This is a political move on Lévi-Strauss' part, one that grants agency and value to what he conceives of as pre-scientific cultures that anthropologists have typically been seen as "primitive."

19 What is important to my argument is that this view of symbolic exchange as the basis of human inquiry it itself structural, or a structure, and avowedly not—contrary to much of the humanistic tradition—that which produces a structure. Again, Lévi-Strauss' debt to the Marx of *Das Kapital* is evident. At the end of the day, when Lévi-Strauss proposes the symbolic or symbolic order he does so in order to found a critical *universal epistemology* by which apparent gaps between ways in which cultures pursue knowledge are rendered immaterial. Again, this is a political move on Lévi-Strauss' part, specifically outlining a politics of unity and universality. But if we are to accept Lévi-Strauss' view of the universality and centrality of the symbolic as the essential, primordial, elementary structure of exchange, we must still ask why the exchange at all? If the revelation of meaning produces a symbolic order, of which language (*langue*) is the paradigm or manifestation, surely there is nothing inherent to this that explains the fact that not only do we dwell in meaning symbolically, but that we also exchange meaning as the basic form of socialization.

20 It is to answer this query that Lévi-Strauss develops his theory of the "floating signifier." In short, Lévi-Strauss argues that because we are, in Heideggerian terms, thrown into a language that pre-exists us, we are exposed to what he calls a "signifier-totality" to which we struggle to fit or adequate "signifieds" (*Mauss* 62). "There is always a non-equivalence or 'inadequation,'" Lévi-Strauss writes, "between the [signifier-totality and signified], a non-fit and overspill which divine understanding alone can soak up; this generates a *signifier-surfeit relative* to the signifieds to which it can be fitted. So, in man's effort to understand the world, he (*sic*) always disposes of a surplus of signification" (ibid, emphasis added) through symbolic exchange. There is a lack at the center of language, or of the symbolic, that puts exchange into effect as a "fundamental… situation which arises out of the human condition," and this lack of a center is precisely what Lévi-Strauss will call in the following paragraph the floating signifier (ibid). And it is with this idea of the floating signifier, which amounts to the lack or inadequation or surfeit of signifiers to signifieds, of symbols to the symbolized, that Lévi-Strauss inaugurates the symbolic or the symbolic order as the paradigmatic methodological consideration of structuralist thought. This is because, as he puts it, the "distribution [exchange] of a supplementary ration [of symbols]… is absolutely necessary to ensure that, in total, the available signifier and the mapped-out signified may remain in the relationship of complementarity *which is the very condition of the exercise of symbolic thinking*" (63, emphasis added).

21 In other words, the floating signifier is the necessary and sufficient condition not only for symbolic exchange but also for symbolic thinking itself. Lévi-Strauss puts it thusly:

> *I believe that notions of the mana type… represent nothing more or less than that floating signifier which is the disability of all finite thought (but also the surety of all art, all poetry, every mythic and*

> *aesthetic invention)…. In other words, accepting the inspiration of Mauss' precept that all social phenomena can be assimilated to language, I see in mana, wakan, orenda, and other notions of the same type, the conscious expression of a semantic function, whose role is to enable symbolic thinking to operate despite the contradiction inherent in it. That explains the apparently insoluble antinomies attaching to the notion of mana, which struck ethnographers so forcibly, and on which Mauss shed light: force and action; quality and state, substantive, adjective and verb all at once; abstract and concrete; omnipresent and localised. And, indeed, mana is all those things together; but is that not precisely because it is none of those things, but a simple form, or to be more accurate, a symbol in its pure state, therefore liable to take on any symbolic content whatever. In the system of symbols which makes up any cosmology, it would just be a zero symbolic value, that is, a sign marking the necessity of a supplementary symbolic content over and above that which the signified already contains, which can be any value at all, provided it is still part of the available reserve, and is not already, as the phonologists say, a term in a set. (63, emphasis added)*

22 Perhaps two examples will help illustrate. The first is—in a return to our beginnings and legible in the echoes of the passage just quoted—that of algebra. Indeed, where Lévi-Strauss writes "semantic" above, we ought to see "algebraic" instead. Lévi-Strauss' view of the symbolic resembles nothing so much an algebraic equation. What makes algebra algebra (from the Arabic for "the restoration" or "the reunion of broken parts [*OED*]) is the missing variable, or more properly in our case what is called the indeterminate. As Bruce Meserve puts it, the algebraic indeterminates are "symbols without any set of values or assumed relations" (98) that "do not take on numbers as values" (99). Essentially then, indeterminates are like variables in an algebraic expression, except that the variable will take on the value of a number while the indeterminate is a placeholder that does not refer to anything. In simple algebra, we are concerned with variables and not indeterminates because when we do simple algebra, we seek the value of a given variable. In the case of more abstract algebra, however, indeterminates are useful precisely because as placeholders; like the zero, they enable the production of functions around them. They are something like the lack that enables the functionality of the algebraic function, and thus they seem to operate in a manner very similar indeed to Lévi-Strauss' floating signifier.

Figure 1

23 A more concrete example is the familiar sliding puzzle, a variant of which is called the fifteen puzzle and is pictured in figure 1. Here, like the indeterminate in used in algebraic formulae or the floating signifier in Lévi-Strauss, it is the absence that makes, in Lévi-Strauss' words, "the relationship of complementarity" in exchange possible. The missing tile makes movement possible, thus in essence creating the possibility or field of meaning. This last is crucial to understanding what Lévi-Strauss wants us to see, which is that without the inadequation of signifieds (things or concepts) and signifiers (or better, the signifier-totality of a given language or *langue*), represented here by the missing tile in the fifteen puzzle, there is no differentiation and thus no exchange and thus no real structure. In Saussure's terms, without the experience of being thrown into *langue* there can be no *language*; or put another way, if in the puzzle we had a sixteenth tile, Lévi-Strauss might argue that what results is a static and

undifferentiated mass of tiles with no relation to each other. Without restrictions, there is no game. In other words, without a lack there can be no exchange.

24 In what Lévi-Strauss views as the human condition, the symbolic/linguistic inadequation between signifieds and the signifier-totality is both the inevitable result of the all-at-once coming of meaning into what then becomes the human and at the same time the necessary condition for the elementary structure of all human interaction, symbolic exchange. This is to say that on Lévi-Strauss' view, symbolic inadequation is not simply a methodological or heuristic innovation but rather the minimal case for something to qualify as human. If this seems like a kind of slippage from what begins in structural linguistics precisely as a methodological distinction—between *langue* and *langage* in Saussure—to something like an existential condition of the human experience, we ought not to blame Lévi-Strauss entirely: the same ambiguity exists in Saussure's *Course* and in Jakobson's formulation of the poetic function of language. [8] At any rate, for Lévi-Strauss, symbolic exchange becomes possible due to a lack—a lack produced by the surplus of signifiers to the significance of the world. But, and this is the crucial part, it is with the floating signifier that Lévi-Strauss inaugurates what we can call the symbolic or the symbolic order, a move that will have important consequences. That inauguration is in fact a shift from the enquiry into the symbol inherited from post-Kantian philosophy to something new. [9]

25 According to Lévi-Strauss, Mauss on *hau* and *mana* and the like in symbolic exchange is very much analogous to the romantic, post-Kantian understanding of the symbol. As Lévi-Strauss views it, and we can add that he is more or less correct here, a sociology or anthropology that subsists on this notion of the symbol as quasi-supernatural—what he unabashedly calls "magical thinking" in the Mauss book—is no true science. At best, it would seem to be an aesthetics. Mauss got close, then, to the promised land of structure, but ultimately he fell back on mystification by confusing the "semantic function" of the floating signifier for the thing itself, for confusing the symbolic structure with a symbol. In much the same way that the arbitrariness of the sign allowed Saussure to shift the methodological orientation of linguistics from *langage* and *parole* to *langue*, the floating signifier is what allows Lévi-Strauss to reveal the symbolic or symbolic order as such.

26 With Lévi-Strauss, the symbol becomes important for the way in which a "symbol in its pure state" (*Mauss* 64), a symbol without content, seems to be required in order symbolic exchange to exist in the first place. The study of symbols then shifts from species to genus. The matter at hand is no longer the content of the symbol or its meaning—the very center of the matter for accounts of the symbol heretofore—but rather the positing of a symbol devoid of meaning or content as the prime mover of symbolic exchange. This is the central role of Lévi-Strauss' floating signifier in continental intellectual history, and it has important consequences.

27 The tremendous influence of this concept can be found throughout poststructural thought of the 1960s through at least the 1980s, and indeed Lévi-Strauss is a touchstone for such disparate thinkers as Lacan, Derrida, Foucault, Deleuze, and Butler. In fact, much of what has come to be called poststructuralism could without too much exaggeration called post-Lévi-Straussianism. For it is with this notion of the symbolic or symbolic order as over and opposed to the symbol itself per se that one of the central questions of poststructuralism—Malabou's aporia of the symbolic—is developed, as we will see briefly below. But oughtn't we ask whether Lévi-Strauss' articulation of the floating signifier, arguably his signal concept and certainly the concept upon which a great many poststructuralists seized, is in fact coherent in and of itself?

4 | Can a Signifier Float?

28 I want to turn now to Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* in order to propose my thesis here, which is that in positing the notion of a floating signifier, Lévi-Strauss has made an important error—namely transfiguring what is for Saussure a method into a kind of metaphysics.

29 In the *Course* Chapter II of Part Two, Saussure writes the following:

> *The linguistic entity exists only through the associating of the signifier and the signified. Whenever only one element is retained, the entity vanishes: instead of a concrete object we are faced with a mere abstraction.... The two-sided linguistic unit has often been compared with the human person, made up of the body and the soul. The comparison is hardly satisfactory. A better choice would be a chemical compound like water, a combination of hydrogen and oxygen; taken separately, neither element has any of the properties of water (103, emphasis added).*

30 It is perhaps not news to those who have read Saussure closely that the distinction of the signifier and the signified is only sensible within in the context

of what he calls here "the linguistic entity." Saussure is of course commonly misread to be making something like a metaphysical claim about language with this distinction, even though he is clear throughout the *Course* that the signifier and the signified are, as I have noted above, the results of a methodological distinction and not a metaphysical one. It is true that Saussure occasionally slips in his account of this distinction, especially earlier in the *Course*, thus perhaps encouraging the metaphysical interpretation, but attention to the *Course* in its entirety makes it clear enough that this is not the case. We have seen so far that Lévi-Strauss' account of the floating signifier transfigures the Saussurean methodological distinction into a metaphysical one with the positing of meaning and thus symbolic exchange by *fiat*. But it is not so much the transfiguration of the linguistic method to the realm of the metaphysical that is the problem here. Rather, the issue is that if we take Saussure seriously in the above excerpt, the very bracketing of signifier from signified is impermissible. [10]

31 There is simply no meaningful way to talk about a signifier without also talking about a paired signified. In fact, according to the founder of structural linguistics, a signifier without a signified would not have "any of the properties of" a sign or of a signifier or of a signified. What Saussure is pointing to has to be read as a real limit to his own proposed science of symbols, to semiology and semiotics. That is, if it is the case in language—our paradigmatic case—that there can simply be no such thing as a signifier that is not associated with a signified, then there can be no coherent way to talk about an "unattached" or floating signifier or of a surplus of signifiers to signifieds. What this means in turn is that it would appear to be simply impossible to apply a Straussian structural methodology to the discussion of symbols in a meaningful way, at least without recourse from method to metaphysics. To use the structural method on symbols in order to derive a pre-concrete symbolic order is to fall into a category error. This isn't because symbols are mystical units of meaning, but rather that if the symbol consists of two parts, a sensuous aspect and an aspect of meaning, those parts cannot be seen as part of a symbol until they are united in a symbol. The same would have to go for the sign. It is fine, to take Saussure's example, to discuss hydrogen and oxygen as discrete elements, but neither have any of the properties of water. Oxygen is a not a floating element that produces a surfeit of hydrogen for the reason that not all hydrogen atoms are bonded with oxygen atoms. In fact, to say this is simply absurd.

32 This might seem like hair-splitting or a simple terminological issue, but I want to insist that it is a theoretical matter. Structuralism writ large and as suggested by Saussure is the product of a methodological distinction that brackets content or specificity (*parole* and *langage*) from form or structure (*lange*). But inherent to that bracketing is a contradiction; one that Lévi-Strauss feels compelled, as we saw above, to address in a strangely metaphysical origin story. That is, the structural move posits a symbolic order or structure that does away with the need for concrete symbols, but in doing so it invalidates its own premise that there is such a thing as a symbolic order because it relies on ideas that only make sense within the context of a concrete symbol. On my analysis, then, Lévi-Strauss' floating signifier not only doesn't and can't float, it's not even a signifier.

33 I don't mean to say that these points A) somehow upend a living theory of human development, or B) that the concepts and knowledge produced in the wake of the floating signifier are somehow devoid of value. Instead, I want to suggest that the problem of the symbolic in mid twentieth-century French thought, one that is produced by Lévi-Strauss' positing of the floating signifier in his Mauss book—to wit the reduction of the human experience to that of a totalizing algorithm of exchange—may in fact not be a problem at all. In order to do so, let us now take a quick look first at the way Jacques Lacan takes Lévi-Strauss' account of the floating signifier and applies it to the psychiatric subject in the Seminar on "The Purloined Letter," and how Derrida takes the implications of both Lévi-Strauss and Lacan into account as he develops one of the primary methods of poststructuralism, deconstruction.

5 | Impacts of the Symbolic: Lacan and Derrida

34 It is not Lévi-Strauss who coins the term "the symbolic" as the elementary structure of humankind. That honor goes to Jacques Lacan. Lacan's work has had a tremendous impact on mid-twentieth century French thought. And while Lacan had many influences, most obviously Freud, Hegel, and Heidegger, it is only after his encounter with Lévi-Strauss' thought that Lacan becomes one of the major figures in twentieth century French thought (Wilcken 183). It is not difficult to see that Lacan fell in love with the notion of the floating signifier and particularly the derivation of the symbolic, which he will dub the Symbolic Order, from it. From the development of his mathemes and schemata to the central insights of two of his best-known essays (the "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter'" and the so-called Rome Discourse, or "The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis"), the shadow of Lévi-Strauss looms large over Lacan's major work.

35 In fact, it can be no accident that Lacan's seminar on Edgar Allan Poe's "The Purloined Letter," which essentially reworks Lévi-Strauss on the floating signifier, holds the inaugural place in Lacan's collected work, *Ecrits*. It is in that

seminar that Lacan argues that "it is the symbolic order which is constitutive for the subject," a fact that will be demonstrated through the analysis of "the decisive orientation which the subject receives from the itinerary of a signifier" (7). The letter in the story's title is a pure symbol, i.e. for Lacan's purposes its specificity is immaterial. It is the movement and fact of a "destination" as Lacan puts it, that begins its circulation. While Lacan writes only "signifier" here, he may as well write "floating signifier" instead. And just as Lévi-Strauss founds the human on the symbolic structure enabled by the floating signifier in *Mauss*, Lacan makes the Symbolic Order constitutive of the subject, essentially making people into algebraic invariables by subjecting specificity to structural analysis. Indeed, the point of the seminar is manifest in Lacan's explanation of his choice to use the French title of the Poe story over the English one: "I have adopted the title Baudelaire gave the story only in order to stress, not the signifiers 'conventional' nature, as it is incorrectly put, but rather *its priority over the signified*" (20, emphasis added). Like Lévi-Strauss' alliance theory of exogamy and the definition of the human as the symbolic animal, Lacan claims that the power of the symbol has nothing to do with its content. Instead, and this is borrowed directly from Lévi-Strauss, it rests with what he calls the itinerary of the symbol—what we can call its exchange.

36 It is worth noting that Lacan's Symbolic is therapeutic, just as is the notion of symbolic exchange in Lévi-Strauss. That is, for Lévi-Strauss, it is through a focus on structure that we can begin to erase the invidious cultural superiority so often seen in the Western human sciences. For Lacan, the Symbolic Order represents the realm of social meaning. Lacan's Symbolic is constitutive of the subject, who is on this model herself a floating signifier or a pure symbol. This is in contrast to what Lacan calls the Imaginary—which is radically subjective and thus outside of the realm of symbolic exchange—and the Real—which is something like the weight of the inscrutable and incoherent it-ness of the world that exists before exchange—the Symbolic Order is the order of coherence and meaning and it is achieved only in symbolic exchange with others. Indeed, the very model of the psychoanalytical "talking cure" is, for Lacan, a re-integration of the subject into the Symbolic Order. There may be an absence at the center of the psyche, at the center of the subject, in Lacan, but it is in exchange with others—in the Symbolic, that is—that one can treat the trauma of the Real and the radical narcissisms of those entrenched in the Imaginary. It is here that we can see that the project of structuralism from Saussure through Lacan is one of construction, not the deconstruction that would eclipse it. If Lacan more or less directly adopted Lévi-Strauss' floating signifier and interest in the symbolic as a structure of exchange for his own purposes, it is precisely in response to the worrisome aspects of this algebraic understanding of humanity, the way in which—to take a few examples—it seems to minimize what Jean-Luc Nancy will call "singularity," the way it seems to totalize the human experience, and consequently the ways in which it reduces the richness and depth of human life to something like an algorithm, that one of the main pillars of what is now called poststructuralism, namely deconstruction, developed. [11]

37 By now, it should come as no surprise that the central figure of deconstruction, Jacques Derrida, often defines his project in terms of the work of Lévi-Strauss. In fact, one of Derrida's signal concepts, the supplement, is initially directly derived out of a reading of Lévi-Strauss on the floating signifier in Derrida's groundbreaking "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Human Sciences." In addition, the second half of Derrida's major work *Of Grammatology* centers on Rousseau and Lévi-Strauss to fine-tune the notion of the supplement. [12] And the long essay "The Purveyor of Truth" addresses Lacan's reading of the Symbolic through the lens of the latter's reading of Poe's "The Purloined Letter," again working through Derrida's notion of the supplement in relation to Lévi-Strauss' symbolic. There, Derrida writes of the content of the purloined letter—the letter's specificity that Lacan does not need to exist— that "[t]he impact of life, *presence of the word* (*parole*), guarantees, in the last instance, the indestructible and *unforgettable uniqueness* of the letter, the taking-place of a signifier which does not get lost, does not ever go astray" (86, emphasis added). Derrida argues that there is no symbolic exchange without some kind of concrete content. A "pure symbol," a symbol without a signified, cannot exist for Derrida, and this fact opens up for him the notion of the supplement. There are, contra Lacan, no letters with nothing in them. Rather, it is the something—the texture if you will—of the specific symbolic exchange that produces what Derrida calls in "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Human Sciences," "play" within the interaction of structure and sign. We might say that for Derrida, in fact signifiers do float, but only with the help of strings, never "purely."

38 The solution that (the early) Derrida offers to the aporia of the symbolic is not a return to humanism however, or to the individual via phenomenology or existentialism. Derridian deconstruction is not to be understood as the work of an agential force. Rather deconstruction is an on-going process, if a philosophically directed one, that is the inevitable excess produced by the work of meaning-making. At the same time, though, it is clear enough that—and the same tendency can be found in Foucault and Butler to take only two other examples—in the space of what Derrida calls play, which is always delimited by the rules of the games (structures), there is *jouissance*: an irreducible, non-fungible engagement with structure and its limits that give a kind of

perspectival, even evanescent, significance to lived life. Of course to Derrida, Foucault, and Butler the stakes of all this are political, not simply hedonistic. [13] Nevertheless, although it critiques structures of power, poststructural deconstruction can broadly be said to typically perform that critique of the universal as such (the famous critique of meta-narratives) *in and through* the analysis of specificity, as Derrida does here with his take on the purloined letter and with the concept of the supplement in general. As Culler puts it, "structuralists take linguistics as a model and attempt to develop 'grammars'—systematic inventories of elements and their possibilities of combination—that would account for the form and meaning…post-structuralists investigate the way in which this project is subverted by the workings of the texts themselves," i.e. by the specificities of the text (22). Derrida perceives, I think, in the structures of Lévi-Strauss and Lacan a resistance to, or even rejection of, specificity—what I have called above content. That is not to say that he rejects "grammatical"/structural analysis, but rather that he is always focused on the specifics of the text(s) being examined.

39 There are many other examples of the continued impact of Lévi-Strauss' thinking on the floating signifier and the development of the symbolic or symbolic order. It is not overstatement to say that they serve as one of the central nodes of poststructuralist thought. Indeed, there is an argument to make—suggested above—that in one sense at least, poststructuralism comes forth as a response to this signal moment in Lévi-Strauss' work. This would mean that those who felt in some way inspired by or skeptical of the floating signifier theory take for granted that it possesses some important explanatory power. Even in Derrida's critique of Lacan's Symbolic, for example, it is assumed that the problem is that Lacan passes *over* a certain specificity of the letter and its repercussions, or that what Lévi-Strauss' analysis of sign and structure *forget* is interpretive play. Of course, there is no reason to believe that someone like Derrida secretly accepted Lévi-Strauss' rather wild claims about the advent of meaning and so forth. Rather, there is something there in the thought of the floating signifier that is compelling enough such that other thinkers find it nigh irresistible. One does not have to be an acolyte of poststructuralism to agree that at the very least, Lévi-Strauss' floating signifier thesis has been immensely fertile ground for other thinkers.

6 | Conclusions

40 The stakes of Levi-Strauss' floating signifier and its reception remain important to us now. It is at least possible that some of the apparent dead ends on the left at present—namely the recent prominence of identitarian concerns—may result from a poststructural over-correction to structuralism. As I have argued it here, Lévi-Strauss' floating signifier and the concept of the symbol that it helped inaugurate serve as a starting point for that over-correction. Although one common complaint of the first wave of poststructural thought is that it did not offer the potential of an active politics of social justice, it is also true that since the late 1980s, as poststructural thought encounters and blends with cultural studies, notions like Derridian free play and *differance*, to say nothing of Foucault's histories of sexuality and Butler's ideas of gender performativity, very much set the stage for the kinds of intersectional, positional or standpoint epistemologies we are seeing today (cf. for example Mann, Taylor). If it is the case that these epistemologies have a tendency toward division and subjectivism that seems antithetical to a politics of solidarity, it may be that the anxiety produced by structuralism and the course correction that followed it is partly to blame.

41 One response to this anxiety was to turn away from universalizing narratives, from totalities, and turn toward multiplicity and multiplicities (Lyotard, Hassan, and so forth). As we have seen, rather than structure or "form," the focus becomes the pluralities and uniquenesses of specificity and that difference slowly shifts from being a space of play to one of boundaries and incommensurability, of intense subjectivization. [14] Analyses of specificity have tremendous value; they have revealed the ways in which identity and subjectivization are intertwined in structures of oppression and repression; they have birthed what is often called intersectionality. At the same time, the very concept of consensus seems under threat as these trends begin to reach their theoretical endpoints. [15]

42 In fact, the end point of a politics of radical incommensurability is already in play in at least one theoretical approach and the debates surrounding it: Afro-pessimism, which argues that through a kind of metaphysical account of slavery, Black people are essentially de-ontologized—taken out of the world. The implications of Afro-pessimism are troubling to liberal progressives as it seeks, as prominent Afro-pessimists Frank Wilderson and Jared Sexton argue, to end the world (i.e. white supremacy) as we know it. But by focusing on the incommensurability of the Black experience in order to mount a theoretical intervention, Afro-pessimists argue that it is only that experience that matters in a political sense. That is, it is not simply an attempt to shift away from the politics of whiteness, but rather a shift away from all other politics but that of (anti)Blackness. [16] While Afro-pessimism is more complex than I can do justice to here, it does illustrate a certain end logic of perspectival or positional incommensurability, in this case by taking that end logic as a strength rather than as a weakness.

43 I mention Afro-pessimism for its radicality and because it is somewhat *au courant*, but we can see similar problems, and I do take these to be problems because they actively reject consensus, in the radical queer theory of Lee Edelman, debates about transgender persons, and so forth. Rather than a logic of multiplicity, the end points of the perspectivalism of the poststructural shift from structure to (back?) to specificity operate on a logic of intense fragmentation, as I think they would readily acknowledge, and in fact often see this reliance as a critical strength. It remains difficult to see, however, how these logics of fragmentation and incommensurability can possibly find sufficient common ground in order to actually change (or even end) the world as we know it. It is both crude and unfair to unilaterally lay the blame for these issues at the feet of something as broad poststructuralism, of course. But if the structural account of symbolic exchange borne of the floating signifier was never coherent in the first place, perhaps we need not think of universalities as *inherently* totalizing, empty, or reductive.

44 While I do not endorse a simplistic return to mid-twentieth century structuralism, it is my view that the contemporary embrace on the left of radical difference constitutes a weakness. I have advocated for a reconsideration of some of the steps that brought us here with the hope that with this reconsideration in mind, we might begin (again?) to think otherwise.

Notes

1 And of course, these notions will be revisited and expanded in the 1980s and 1990s in Edward Said's work (see *Orientalism* in particular).

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2 Marx, geology, Freud.

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3 To differentiate from Lacan's specific psychoanalytical usage of the Symbolic Order, typically capitalized, I will stick with "symbolic" or "symbolic order" without the capitalization.

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4 It may well be that Jakobson is partly to blame for this transfiguration when he, as Andrzej Warminski recently put it, commits to a "a full-scale (and explicit) retraction of the principle of the arbitrariness of the sign" in structural linguistics ("Resistances to Rhetoric: Jakobson and Genette" 7).

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5 As a side note, Lévi-Strauss will remain fascinated with this algebra of ideas and that fascination will inspire Jacques Lacan and Alain Badiou.

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6 Although it is crucial, I will not be able to address the ways in which the Prague circle influenced Lévi-Strauss in this essay. It is certainly correct to say that Lévi-Strauss' familiarity with structural linguistics derives more proximally from Trubetzkoy and Jakobson than it does from Saussure himself. Having acknowledged this fact, and that the Prague circle made its own redoubtable progress in linguistics, perhaps it will be useful to note that Lévi-Strauss' own desire to see structural phonology as the model for the social sciences can be seen as problematic. For example, as I mention in footnote 4, Warminski has recently written on Jakobson. In that essay, Warminski argues in no uncertain terms that in "Linguistics and Poetics" Jakobson "hallucinates" a natural or motivated connection between phonemes and semantic content, thus indicating Jakobson's putative "retraction of the principle of the arbitrariness of the sign" (8, 7). Neither this essay nor a footnote in it are the places to litigate such an accusation. Nevertheless, this juncture may prove instructive. If, as I have argued it in this paper, the problem with the floating signifier results from Lévi-Strauss playing a bit too fast and loose with the principles of structural linguistics, and if Jakobson for one plays too fast and loose with said principles, it may be that a further focus on the debt Lévi-Strauss owes to Jakobson would in fact only strengthen my argument here about the floating signifier.

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7 "The difference [between ways of knowing in pre-scientific cultures and scientific cultures] is one of degree, not of nature, but it does exist. *We can therefore expect the relationship between symbolism and knowledge to conserve common features in the non-industrial societies and in our own*, although those features would not be equally pronounced in the two types of society. It does not mean that we are creating a gulf between them, if we acknowledge that the work of equalising of the signifier to fit the signified has been pursued more methodically and rigorously from the time when modern science was born, and within the boundaries of the spread of science" (*Mauss* 62, emphasis added).

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8 See Warminski's "Lightstruck: 'Hegel on the Sublime'" on the latter.

9 In short, the post-Kantian/romantic view of the symbol is that within it is a motivated connection between what Hegel calls the *sinnilch*, or "sensuous," object and its meaning. On this understanding, the symbol is something like an organic, living thing in which meaning naturally and non-arbitrarily inheres. It is this view that animates romantic art and thought and that posits beauty and art as essentially redemptive, as a precursor of philosophy or even on par with it. Thus, Kant's views on the aesthetic, Hegel's views on art, Schiller's aesthetic theory, Nietzsche's writings on tragedy, and to skip ahead, Heidegger's aesthetic "turn" (*Kehre*). Indeed, this post-Kantian/romantic view is precisely the understanding of art that Walter Benjamin rejects as ahistorical in the *Trauerspiel* book, where he attempts to shift the paradigm of aesthetic interpretation from symbol-centered and romantic to allegorical and modern.

10 Nor does recourse from Saussurean linguistics to Trubetzkovian phonology or Jakobsonian linguistics help Lévi-Strauss avoid this problem. For those versions of structural linguistics to avoid the category error above, their models would have to endow terms like signifier and signified with far more power than even Saussure imagined. For in Saussure, we must always remember, the breaking of the sign in two parts is an artificial distinction that allows us to see something about language we did not see before. It is his Archimedean point. If structural linguistics is or was a science, this methodological innovation is why. What he does not do, and cannot do without resorting to precisely the same kind of mistake that I argue Lévi-Strauss makes, is claim that that signifier and signified are phenomenal components of a sign. Rather, they are, as in the Greek *theoria*, ways of looking at language.

11 It is no accident that Jonathan Culler focuses on deconstruction as being the most notable post-structural move in his seminal *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism*(1982).

12 The importance of Rousseau to Derrida's development of the supplement in *Of Grammatology* ought not be understated. At the same time, the discussion of Lévi-Strauss is, I would argue, equally important.

13 Not everyone is convinced. Foucault has often been accused of endorsing a proto-neoliberal view, and philosopher Martha Nussbaum has rather famously accused Butler of "hip quietism" in the latter's seminal *Gender Trouble*.

14 The early Derrida would of course object to the use to which the term "deconstruction" has been put in the post-cultural studies era, as do many dedicated poststructuralists today. I do not think it is worth arguing about what deconstruction really is here. Rather, I want to say that certain strands of more or less Derridian deconstruction have been used to undergird standpoint epistemology in various ways.

15 It is worth recalling that the notion of hate speech as punishable act is at least partly based in the rise of critical race theory, itself a thoroughly poststructural paradigm (see, for example, "Race and Postmodernism" in Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas).

16 See Day's "Being or Nothingness: Indigeneity, Antiblackness, and Settler Colonial Critique" for example.

Footnotes | References | Details

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