

From *Anti-Oedipus* to *Anti-Narcissus*: Proposals to Decolonize Psychoanalysis

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Abstract

According to Deleuze and Guattari ([1972] 2009¹), the Oedipus complex is a historically produced social symptom that captures desire in neurotic and familial, capitalist, and Christian forms. From this perspective, narcissism is not a primordial condition, which precedes the Oedipus complex phase, but is its consequence and effect, reversing the logic of human development postulated by Psychoanalysis. The aim here is to carry on with Deleuze and Guattari's criticisms of Psychoanalysis, approaching narcissism as a phenomenon manufactured by this same civilization that aims to combat it. If in Anti-Oedipus, Deleuze and Guattari demonstrate that the Oedipus complex is not a natural and universal path to the formations of the unconscious, but is produced by the civilized capitalist machine, Narcissus is now placed in the spotlight, unfolding the narratives of psychoanalytic theory about a supposed anti-social human nature.

Keywords: narcissism, colonialism, Deleuze and Guattari

1. Introduction

In the video installation entitled *Narcissus and Echo*, artist Grada Kilomba (2019a) reinterpreted these classic characters from Greek mythology from a white and male perspective. In an interview, she

¹ The date in brackets indicates the year of the original publication of the work - only indicated in the first citation of the work in the text; in the following cases, only the date of the edition consulted by the author will be recorded.

explained:

Narcissus is like a metaphor for the patriarchal colonial society that only sees itself, only repeats itself, and makes everyone else unviable, and Echo is the woman, who is reduced to silence, who has no voice but wants to speak (Kilomba 2019b, our translation).

The figure of Narcissus illustrates the point of view of the white man, for whom only those who reflect their own idealized image are recognized and have the right to exist. Echo, the one who was condemned to repeat Narcissus's words and follow his path, illustrates the silencing and submission – through violence or fascination – of all other types of existence and thought.

Grada Kilomba's performance under the beautiful title of 'poetic disobediences' denounces with strength and kindness the supremacy of the Western white man, elevated to the abstract, neutral, and universal model of what it means to be a human and what it means to be the most perfect and valuable creature of all creation. The anthropologist Viveiros de Castro similarly evokes the theme of Narcissus. His book *Canibals Metaphysics* (2014) is presented as if it were the synopsis of a book not yet written, entitled 'The Anti-Narcissus', in tribute to *Anti-Oedipus* (2009) by Deleuze and Guattari. The mythological character is brought to the field of epistemology to denounce a colonial metaphysics that aims to eliminate everything that escapes the white Western model – a model that creates and defines what is True and False, Good and Evil, Beautiful and Ugly.

Both Kilomba's artistic work and Viveiros de Castro's anthropology serve here as triggers to associate the figure of Narcissus with coloniality and to return to the psychoanalytic theory of narcissism under this perspective. The aim is to demonstrate that the conception

of human nature involved is committed to a colonialist-based civilizing project, defended as the only possibility of socialization. Such criticisms of Psychoanalysis have already been stated, in other terms, by Deleuze and Guattari in *Anti-Oedipus* (2009). The intention is to revisit them, indicating ways to articulate an Anti-Narcissus for Psychoanalysis in a procedure similar to what Viveiros de Castro (2014: 40) imagined for Anthropology: a proposal, that is both epistemological and ethical, 'of being the theory/practice of the permanent decolonization of thought'.

It is about problematizing the notion of humanity that was, in different times and spaces, conditioned to the Eurocentric model of superiority, legitimizing the rights to explore, dominate, and eliminate *what was once* considered non-human – black people, indigenous people, the behavior of women, barbarians, madmen, those with physical anomalies, etc. – and *what is still* considered non-human – animals, plants, mountains, rivers, etc. Such a model of humanity is inseparable from a civilizing and colonizing project, which also infiltrates the production of scientific knowledge. We end up placing ourselves under the aegis of a certain epistemology, which determines the questions that deserve to be asked and by what methods they can be analyzed, thus, directing the possible answers; a certain Western and colonial metaphysics, which defines not only what is true, but also who holds the power to enunciate the truths. Psychoanalysis, despite its revolutionary aspects, still holds something of this tradition of colonial thought in its assumptions. The aim is to give visibility to some of these assumptions through the theory of narcissism.

2. Anti-Narcissus

On the website of the Anthropology department of the University of São Paulo, we find the following presentation of this discipline: 'Whatever the definition adopted, it is possible to understand anthropology as a form of knowledge about cultural diversity, that is,

the search for answers to understand what we are based on the mirror provided by the "Other". It is possible to extract from this presentation an epistemology that can be extended to any area of knowledge and that leads us to the topic of narcissism, as soon as we begin to ask ourselves: what does this mirror reflect?

The relationship between 'I' and 'Other' is associated with the dichotomy between subject and object, in which the 'I' is generally assimilated to the subject and activity, while the 'other' is related to the object and passivity. If modern science sought to be neutral and free from assumptions – to the point of objectively reflecting its object of study, be it a mechanical artifact, an animal, or a culture –, internal and external criticism will demonstrate that the knowledge produced says more about the observer than the observed. From the 19th century onwards, several scientific disciplines understood that *between* the subject and the object, there has been an intermediate space of mutual affection, which compromises the ambition of neutrality and objectivity of modern science, especially in the field of humanities. The theory of narcissism, as proposed by psychoanalysis, allows us to glimpse, in this *between*, a game of mirroring, a zone of indiscrimination where one side necessarily begins to reflect and project aspects of the other.

We shall remember the myth of Narcissus, as narrated by Ovid more than two thousand years ago: Narcissus, when drinking water in a lake, comes across his own reflection and falls madly in love, to the point of spending the rest of his life in a futile and desperate effort to bond with the loved one.

O you extraordinary boy, why play these tricks with me?
When I seek you, where do you go? You cannot be running
from my shape and youth, and I am someone who has been
loved by nymphs! You promise me, with that loving face of

yours, unknown hope. When I hold out my arms to you, then you are happy to hold out your own. When I smile, you smile. Often I have seen you weeping when I shed tears. And if I nod my head, you return my gesture. From the motion of your fair mouth I guess you send back words which do not reach my ears. I am in you. I have felt it. I am not being deceived by my own image. I am burning up with love for my own self. I rouse the flames and suffer from them, too (Ovid).

If, in the myth, Narcissus has some moments of lucidity and realizes the illusion in which he is passionately trapped, Psychoanalysis proposes the concept of narcissism to address the structural aspect of this illusion and indiscrimination, which would infallibly and unconsciously guide all our relationships. Narcissism becomes a symbol of this fundamental mistake, in which we piously believe that we are relating to a radical Otherness, to a different Other, when we are only relating to projected aspects of ourselves, to our own reflection.

Focusing on the epistemological field of Anthropology, Viveiros de Castro points out the action of narcissism in theories about 'other' cultures, which began to reveal much more of the prejudices, racism, and 'sordid interests' of the Eurocentric perspective than the existence of cultural diversity. But it is not this aspect of narcissism, already explored in postmodern literature, that we wish to denounce. For the author (2014: 40), 'by proceeding as if every 'European' discourse on peoples of non-European tradition(s) serves only to illumine our representations of the other' and only serves to illuminate our inventions and illusions projected onto the other also means to remain in a narcissistic position, perhaps even more perverse, by reducing the Other to an inert, passive or inaccessible object. The Anti-Narcissus proposal, in continuity to Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus* (2009), is based on the principle that the Other is always present, in a co-

production, returning reflections in which we no longer recognize ourselves, thus disordering and transforming the very structure of the self. While Narcissus colonizes, imposing a mirror through identification with the sovereign ideal, the Anti-Narcissus cannibalizes, and steps through the mirror, swallowing and destabilizing the imposition of any structure that claims to be ideal and permanent.

One allows oneself to be cannibalized and decolonized. To do this, it is necessary not only to break the mirror, whose reflection shows only idealized projections of oneself but to go through it, in a radical experience similar to that of Carroll's character in *Alice Through the Looking-Glass* ([1872] 2009): when Alice steps through the mirror, initially it seems that the world over there is just an inverted mimetic fantasy of the observer over here, until a logic of thinking radically different comes into action. From this inverted world, one does not emerge the same, even risking losing one's own name (Carroll 2009). To decolonize, it is necessary to dismantle narcissism and operate beyond the convenient and comfortable territories of the Self, accessing the differential mechanisms underlying the figures of identity, similarity, opposition, and contradiction (Deleuze [1968] 2006). It is necessary to renounce the desire to colonize the Other and to exercise domination, control, and subjugation over the Other, nullifying the potential for difference whenever it insinuates itself. For Viveiros de Castro (2014: 41), it is the form itself or the structure of our conceptual imagination that must go into a regime of variation, and assume itself as a variant, version, transformation.

It is this overlap between the figure of Narcissus and that of the colonizer that will be developed here. Would it be possible to analyze the psychoanalytic concept of narcissism from the perspective of the desire to colonize, making them equivalent? If so, would it be a desire inherent to the condition of the human species and the emanations of the instinct for self-preservation, or would it be a desire produced by

specific social conditions? If in *Anti-Oedipus*, Deleuze and Guattari (2009) demonstrate that the Oedipus complex is not a natural and universal path to the formations of the unconscious, as defended by Psychoanalysis, but is manufactured by the civilized capitalist machine, would it be possible to keep this critical proposal now placing Narcissus in the spotlight? The aim is to investigate psychoanalytic theory, in its conception of narcissism as an inherent condition of the human species and not as something produced by specific social conditions. Theoretical constructions about a supposed anti-social human nature seem inseparable from the colonial Eurocentric perspective.

3. Narcissism

In the book *Anti-Oedipus* (Deleuze; Guattari 2009), the notion of narcissism does not receive any privileged treatment. This is a term used less than 30 times and generally appears in the expression 'Oedipal-narcissistic machines'. Obviously, the little space dedicated to this concept is not due to the authors' ignorance of its importance in psychoanalytic theory. It turns out that narcissism is included in the very understanding of the Oedipus complex developed there. While psychoanalytic theory approaches narcissism as the first stage of human life and as our most primitive way of relating to the world, a way that must be abandoned and forwarded to the Oedipus complex, Deleuze and Guattari (1977: 122) understand that narcissism is produced by the Oedipal and family structure, being one of its derivatives.

Too many forces and too many people depend on Oedipus; there are too many interests at stake. To begin with, there would be no narcissism without Oedipus. Oedipus will prompt a great many moans and whimpers yet. It will inspire research projects that are more and more unreal. It will

continue to nourish dreams and phantasies. Oedipus is a vector: 4, 3, 2, 1, 0... Four is the famous fourth symbolical term, 3 is the triangulation, 2 is the dual images, 1 is narcissism, and 0 is the death instinct. *Oedipus is the entropy of the desiring-machine*, its tendency to external abolition.

According to the authors, without Oedipus, there would be no narcissism. From 'an aggregate of departure – transfinite, constituted by all the objects, agents, and relations of sociodesiring-production' (Deleuze; Guattari 2009: 358), Oedipus is inserted as a transcendent and repressive element, capturing and codifying all free flows within a familial pre-determined structure. The symbolic dimension present there is conditioned to operate, in a limited way, as the fourth abstract term, which combines and affects the other three: father, mother, and son. Everything starts to be cut into this triangular shape and the libido starts to circulate only in this closed space of the triads, whose investment, atrophying, produces the excluded third and all the destructive feelings arising from it: envy, jealousy, possessiveness, hatred, murderous and incestuous desires. Narcissism is a consequence of this self-enclosed functioning, the last and inevitable refuge of the imprisoned libido, a place where the Self encounters self-destruction and death drive. 'Oedipus is a race for death' (Deleuze; Guattari 2009: 359).

Deleuze and Guattari invert the equation postulated by psychoanalysis, moving narcissism from a supposed natural starting point to its realization as a terrible arrival point. Oedipus is the name of the desire captured in neurotic and capitalist forms, it is the machinery that manufactures Narcissus in series. However, revealing the Oedipal operation of producing desire, as Deleuze and Guattari do, does not seem to be enough to exhaust the issue of narcissism. Narcissus is produced by Oedipus, but it also seems to be its most

nefarious metamorphosis and exacerbation, transforming each person into a warlike territory, whose rigid borders must be defended with claws and teeth, attacks and defenses. Directing the discussions started by Deleuze and Guattari in *Anti-Oedipus* (2009) towards an Anti-Narcissus, as imagined by Viveiros de Castro (2014), can be, in addition to a tribute, a pertinent way of continuing these critical proposals that, more than 50 years later, remain fresh, powerful, and necessary, but which have had little or no penetration in the field of psychoanalysis.

There [in Africa] or here, it's the same thing: Oedipus is always colonization pursued by other means, it is the interior colony, and we shall see that even here at home, where we Europeans are concerned, it is our intimate colonial education (Deleuze; Guattari 2009: 170).

Oedipus 'is our intimate colonial formation that corresponds to the form of social sovereignty. We are all little colonies and it is Oedipus that colonizes us' (Deleuze; Guattari 2009: 265). Can it be said that once colonized by Oedipus, we also become colonizers, that is, we become narcissistic?

According to Psychoanalysis, no one becomes narcissistic. We are all narcissistic because that is human nature in its origins. Narcissism is the first and most fundamental phase of psychic development which, throughout the first year of life, provides the basis for all later, more complex and sophisticated, psychic functions to be built. This is the phase of construction of the Self, this psychic instance that emerges as a kind of control and organization center based on the initial experiences of pleasure and pain.

If initially the body suffers pain and pleasure in a completely passive way, the Self concerns reactive and active forms of functioning

and, once it is constituted as an instance, nothing escapes its mediation. The Self begins to interpose and act on every impulse, flow, or psychic association. Its function is defensive and protective, through internal threats (drives in a free state and disconnected from joint functioning) and external threats.

Psychoanalysis assumes that the human baby comes into the world unable to discriminate between the internal and external world, between imagination and reality. Such limits are not innate but are progressively developed with the formation of the Self and the resulting reality principle. Narcissism is the designation for both the moment that precedes and stabilizes this construction and the idealized remnants of this initial phase, which are transformed into a permanently operating structure in the subject. We leave narcissism as babies, but narcissism will never leave us. We long to return to that primordial state of indiscrimination and passivity, in which there were intense sensations of pleasure and omnipotence.

For a baby to develop strong and healthy, in its first months of life, the environment must adapt to it, satisfying all its needs and demands, as it is an organism that is still unable to withstand pain and displeasure. The pain of hunger or the despair of feeling lost in the void, for example, are experiences that, if prolonged too much, are devastating for the baby, as they trigger a circuit of defenses that prevent the good integration and stability of the Self. A 'good enough environment' (Winnicott [1968] 1999a) guarantees the baby the experience of 'his majesty, the baby' (Freud [1914] 2010a). Imagine yourself from the perspective of a baby, who is just a few months old, surrounded by constant loving gazes, and whose needs are met at the slightest babble. The baby feels in a central position, around whom everything gravitates. Around the first few months, a healthy baby has accumulated enough experiences for, when hungry, expecting something and beginning to imagine what satisfies his hunger. However, his internal perception

(memory) has not yet distinguished itself from the external perception (those coming from the sense organs). When remembering the satisfaction produced by the breastfeeding experience and then having this experience, the baby lives the illusion that it is he who creates and controls his own satisfaction (Winnicott [1968] 1999b). This state of omnipotence, where the world is perceived as a controllable extension of oneself, is crucial for the healthy development of the Self and more complex and sophisticated psychic resources. From then on, the subject can become someone who tolerates pain and frustration without fragmenting, without falling into schizophrenic and paranoid defensive states.

It turns out that this illusory experience of omnipotence leaves a permanent mark of pleasure, which the organism will try at all costs to repeat. From there, an ideal of oneself is built: one feels that there was a time when they were already perfect, complete, loved, and desired unconditionally; when imagining was enough to have their desires satisfied and to avoid all evils, without depending on anything or anyone. An illusion about *what was gone* starts to guide *what one wants to be*, infiltrating all of the subject's object relations. According to Freud, the narcissistic dimension is always present in significant bonds, so we are always looking for the idealized parts of ourselves in others. Freud (2010a: 24, our translation) claims that a person loves: 1) According to the narcissistic type: a) what they themselves are (themselves), b) what they themselves were, c) what they themselves would like to be, d) the person who was part of themselves [the child].

According to psychoanalysis, human relationships are regulated by the unconscious attractive forces of identification and similarity and by the phantasmatic logic of narcissism. This is one of the main points of criticism by Deleuze and Guattari (2009), for whom unconscious syntheses are connected through difference and are passive, that is, they ignore the activity of the Self. More than that, they are syntheses

that ignore the ontological distinction between nature, human, and artificial, deepening the divergence with the psychoanalytic theory.

4. Becoming human

It is possible to deepen this criticism by Deleuze and Guattari, highlighting the conception of nature defended by psychoanalysis, not always explicitly, through the theory of narcissism. Nature, in this case, is equivalent to what is conceived as narcissism: a kind of constitutive selfishness that, in the case of the human being, must be guaranteed and reaffirmed during initial development, without which the boundaries between the Self and the Other, between internal sensations and external perceptions, between fantasy and reality.

Understanding human social relations, according to psychoanalysis, involves the assumption that the natural state is selfish and perverse, blind and indifferent to relationships of otherness. This means that there must be subsequent and constant work by culture to dismantle the original narcissism and convert it into altruism, transforming it into ideals, in favor of insertion and the possibility of social bonds. It is worth mentioning the provocation from *quilombola* master Bispo dos Santos (2023: 30): 'Relating in an original way, for the Euro-Christian, is a sin. They try to humanize and make synthetic everything that is original'.

We need to become human and social, which implies fighting an eternal battle against nature, inside and outside us. First, building a system of defenses against the savagery and primitivism of the *It*, against the perverse-polymorphic, partial, and chaotic drives, which do not know the appropriate paths for their satisfaction. Then, submitting to a Transcendent Law, at the same time repressive and civilizing, capable of guaranteeing the necessary union between the human species and guaranteeing the joint creation of technologies to combat the natural forces that threaten the survival of our species. The

psychoanalytic conception postulates an essentially hostile and negative primary nature, which must be subjugated by social organization and civilizing progress.

The human being does not have a calm nature, eager for love, and at best only defends himself when attacked, but his instinctual abilities include a powerful inclination towards aggression. For him, his neighbor is not only a possible collaborator but also a temptation, to be used to satisfy his tendency to aggression, to exploit his workforce, to use him sexually without his consent, to appropriate his possessions, to humiliate him, to cause him pain, to martyr him and to kill him (Freud [1930] 2010c: 363, our translation).

It turns out that such a social and repressive operation, despite guaranteeing the formation of a united group capable of protecting and defending its members, cannot eliminate hostility between the groups. Thus, the 'narcissism of small differences' (Freud [1921] 2010b) is found in the bowels of civilization: we, who are connected by identification and who constitute a family, a race, a religion, or a country, love our fellow humans and hate those who are different; we, the equals, are good and superior, and we judge those who are different as inferior and bad, as threats that must be eliminated. There will always be tension between those close to me and the others. A system of privileges and favors for mine and harm and attacks for others is established. War, racism, and xenophobia thus find a natural and universal explanation, without considering that the ambition to colonize, whether individual, American, Russian, European, or Greco-Roman, may be produced in specific social conditions.

Are we dealing with natural data, which defines what the human is in its essence, or are we dealing with a manufactured narcissism,

engendered by the same civilization that supposedly aims to combat it? Despite the cleverness of Freudian theory, with Deleuze and Guattari it becomes evident how much psychoanalysis remains limited in a structure of thought inherited from modernity, in which nature and the primitive are essentially negative and inferior, something to be tamed and fought against by culture; in which hope for salvation is placed in scientific progress and the unquestionable virtues of a specific model of civilization. By extrapolating the notion of private property to the subjective sphere, psychoanalysis makes narcissism the irreducible core of psychic and social malaise.

5. Conclusion

We sought to indicate some parameters to place the theory of narcissism in a specific cultural perspective, which, believing that it had found a universal human nature, was merely looking at a mirror, describing a very circumscribed functioning, where the ideals of colonization prevail. A theory that is the result of a certain social arrangement, which for millennia has judged itself and imposed itself as the most developed and superior on planet Earth, perhaps in the universe. A Greco-Roman model of culture, which swallows and colonizes all others, freezing them in its museums, transforming everything into itself, constructing all the narratives and truths of the world, and evaluating everything with its own scale. Narcissus, the colonizer, the despot, the sovereign.

Would it be possible to construct a psychoanalysis capable of repositioning the dualism of nature and culture, inherited from the modern tradition of thought? A psychoanalysis capable of not only repositioning the contours between the Self and the Other, but mainly the contours of the human and the non-human? A psychoanalysis that multiplies its theoretical interpretations, instead of unifying them around universals? Which impacts would this have on psychoanalytic

theory and practice? This is not a matter of answering these questions, but of defending a psychoanalysis that is not exempt from the contributions arising from feminist, decolonial, ethnic-racial, and ecological thoughts, which force the transformation and renewal of their concepts. But, above all, it is about defending a psychoanalysis capable of listening to the voices that resist and insist, voices that do not come from scientific and academic circles, but from territories traditionally associated with the uneducated and uncivilized: *quilombos*, indigenous villages, rural, peripheral, and marginal communities, whose ways of living and relating no longer indicate a past to be overcome and start to point out ways to the future. If psychoanalysis begins to listen to these voices, allowing itself to be cannibalized, it may undergo irreversible epistemological mutations, producing even more efficient antidotes to the poison of capitalism and narcissism that inhabits us. Except for those who believe that the only possible future is to continue 'progressing' and colonizing, this time conquering Mars or the Moon.

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